ALL ABOUT MARRIAGE

By ETHEL HUESTON

PRUDENCE OF THE PARSONAGE
PRUDENCE SAYS SO
PRUDENCE'S SISTER
PRUDENCE'S DAUGHTER
LEAVE IT TO DORIS
EVE TO THE RESCUE
MERRY O
SWEDEY
COASTING DOWN EAST
IDLE ISLAND
GINGER ELLA
GINGER AND SPEED
THE PEOPLE OF THIS TOWN
BIRDS FLY SOUTH
FOR GINGER'S SAKE
ROWENA RIDES THE RUMBLE
GOOD TIMES
THAT HASTINGS GIRL
BLITHE BALDWIN
BEAUTY FOR SALE
STAR OF THE WEST
THE MAN OF THE STORM
A ROOF OVER THEIR HEADS
CALAMITY JANE OF DEADWOOD GULCH
HIGH BRIDGE
THE HONORABLE UNCLE LANCY
UNCLE LANCY FOR PRESIDENT
PREACHER'S WIFE
THIS ONE KINDNESS
DRINK TO ME ONLY . . .
MOTHER WENT MAD ON MONDAY
NO SHORTAGE OF MEN
PLEASE, NO PAREGORIC!
HEAVEN AND VICE VERSA



All about Marriage

A NOVEL

BY

ETHEL HUESTON

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ALL ABOUT MARRIAGE

1

DONNA COLLWELL let herself through the front door into the dimly lighted hall with the noiselessness of long practice. Inside, with the door closed behind her, she shook herself with brisk impatience, as if to brush away clustering snowflakes. But the snow had long since ceased falling and there were no flakes. She dropped her white fur wrap and hood on a hall chair and pulled the cord to extinguish the light of the *torchère* that had been left burning for her.

Silently she ascended the long stairs and turned down the dark corridor. She had no need to feel her way. She knew every inch of that hall, every inch of the house. It was her home. As she passed the door of her parents' room she paused briefly, half expecting to hear a drowsy query from her mother, "Is it you, Donna?" There was no query. It had taken Donna a long time to break her mother of the childish habit of lying awake to greet her when she returned at night. She had succeeded after a fashion. Her mother no longer called out to her.

Donna was not a parent and did not know that although maternal nature can be silenced it can not be controlled. Her mother no longer called out to her but she slept lightly, waiting, until her daughter came. She had heard the car crunching snow as it entered the driveway. Still she waited. Donna was with Mark Banister. Even on winter nights they often sat long in the parked car. Mrs. Collwell dozed again. Later, much later, she heard, or thought she heard, light steps on the snowy porch below. She sensed rather than heard Donna's soft ascent of the stairs and her passage

through the darkened hall. Then she sighed in sleepy comfort, snuggled her face against her husband's shoulder and went to sleep in earnest.

Inside the closed door of her room, Donna did not press the light button. Without fumbling, in utter darkness, she placed her earrings, necklace and rings in the proper compartments of the velvet jewel drawer of her vanity. She hung her evening gown on its satin-padded hanger in the closet and set her silver slippers in their accustomed place on the shoe rack. In darkness she prepared for bed, donned pajamas, furry bathrobe and mules. In darkness she brushed her teeth and washed her hands, not bothering with the removal of make-up.

The covers of her bed were turned back in readiness for her. It was her mother's way of saying good night, now that she was cured of the childishness of calling out. Donna took the down puff from the foot of the bed, pulled an easy chair around to face the wide window, draped herself warmly in the silken comfort and sat down.

It was three-thirty on Sunday morning. There was no moon but the snow and the pale sky blended into a vague lightness in which the snow-bowed trees were like little mountains of the same vague lightness, faintly emphasized.

Donna sat motionless, huddled in the big chair, until the lightness paled into full morning. She was thinking.

If, on that Sunday afternoon, when various special friends dropped in as they always did on Sunday afternoon when Donna was at home, she should have announced gaily, "I sat up all night by the window, thinking!" the remark would have been greeted with fond, derisive chortles of unbelieving glee.

"Thinking! How, Donna?"

"What with, Donna?"

"Who wound up the gray cells, Donna?"

"What gray cells?"

"Did you have to use a dictionary, Donna?"

They would not have believed it. Her parents would have believed it, because Donna did not lie, but they would have been surprised and puzzled. They would have wondered if something had happened. They would have asked if she were feeling well.

In the eight years that had passed since Donna was sixteen she had sat up many nights, all night, at that same window—thinking. Only Donna knew that. To her, thinking was a secret, personal, private thing; a thing to be indulged in behind a closed door, locked away beyond laughter, reserved from question or comment.

On this night, she was not sad but mildly regretful. An era had closed in her life and, though she saw it end with reluctance, she reminded herself that there were other eras to come—less happy eras, perhaps; yes, probably less happy, but more exciting, more purposeful.

On that night, in the parked car in the driveway of her home, Mark Banister had proposed to her. Donna had postponed that proposal as long as she could, clinging to the happiness they had shared so many years, but on this night it was inevitable. Realizing that she could stall no longer, she had faced it firmly.

On that night, early in December, Donna's crowd had held their yearly party at the Lakeside Club. The Lakeside was not really a club, it was merely called that from custom and for convenience. It was housed in a clumsy, rambling structure on the shore of a private lake. It had been instituted, before Donna and her crowd were born, by their fathers and mothers and had been added to, improved and modernized by their own physical efforts and financed by the scant allowances of their childhood. There was no initiation and there were no dues. Membership was not by election but by the natural social selectivity that prevailed in the community.

In earlier years the Lakeside crowd had held its big party on New Year's Eve. The war changed that. For a few years there had been no party—no men. On this year, at the insistence of the

married members, the date had been pushed forward to early December. The married members were a powerful majority and their argument was sound. Christmas week was a family holiday, and they were families now. Some would be away from home, visiting relatives. Others had relatives coming to visit them, and they couldn't very well walk off on visiting in-laws on New Year's Eve, could they? Besides—and this was conclusive—it was almost impossible to get baby sitters on New Year's Eve. Baby sitters, too, had dates on New Year's Eve. So the big party was moved up to the first Saturday night in December.

It had been very nice—not like the parties of earlier years but very nice. The Lakeside afforded no such luxury as regular club service but they got around that by borrowing and loaning maids from their various families and hiring a bartender. Some married couples objected to the costly consumption of liquor by certain members and guests, but they had got over that hurdle by signing stubs for their beverages, the bills to be sorted later and the charges equitably apportioned.

The party had gone off very well and by unvoiced agreement the unhappy changes in the group were ignored by all. David was not there. David, Donna's brother, had not returned from the war. Annette, David's wife, now his widow, was there with a new young man from New York. Nice enough, apparently, but they did not know him and to them Annette was still David's wife, the mother of his small son.

Rita and Bill were not there. Bill, with his good flying record, had landed a nice job with an airplane company in California and they had gone west. The Lakeside crowd could never be the same without Rita and Bill.

Nina was not there. Nina and Ray had married early in the war when Ray was sent away to training camp. Later, when he came home on his first leave, Nina had started proceedings for a divorce. Now she was married again, to some stranger, and living

down in Texas. Ray was there with his new wife, Adelaide, a girl he had brought back from England. She was all right, very pleasant, but they were too used to saying "Nina and Ray" to permit the new "Ray and Adelaide" to come easily.

Thelma was not there. Thelma had been the baby of their crowd, accepted because she was Marie's sister and the two were inseparable. Marie being one of them, Thelma had been the baby sister of the group. Thelma, too young for them and too young for marriage, had briefly enjoyed a romantic wartime elopement but the romance had waned with the honeymoon. Thelma, a chastened wraith, unrecognizable as the gay baby of the Lakeside crowd, had come home alone to have a baby. She did not have the baby. One morning she did not waken from her sleep. An overdose of sedative, accidental, of course, her relatives and friends repeated too often and too insistently.

There were others at the party, quite young ones, younger even than Thelma. They had been considered infants when Donna and her crowd were having their happiest times at the Lakeside. Now they were conspicuously present, patently taking over in their turn. Some of them were married and one, whom Donna remembered as an impertinent little brat, was the mother of twins.

Mark Banister was unchanged. Donna, dancing in his arms, talked along in her old cheerful manner, teasing, chaffing, gay in repartee, to which he responded in kind as he had always done. But no light chatter could entirely banish the nagging consciousness of all the tragic changes time had brought.

Conversation among the girls was different too, and for some reason it made Donna, the unmarried, feel old and wise and sophisticated. Comparison of formulae and baby weights; tribulations with baby sitters; high cost of groceries; job injustices to which husbands were subject—blatant trivialities in a world burning with terrific issues.

Donna burrowed her head against Mark's cheek contentedly

and for a while they danced in silent pleasure. That, she mused, was one of Mark's best points; whether you talked or whether you were silent, you were sure of his companionable contentment. She glanced up at him, a glance of approval which froze suddenly on her bright face. Mark was not gazing down at the top of her head with his usual rapt adoration. His eyes, deeply shining, were fixed off somewhere in space, away from her. His lips were curved in a broad smile.

Donna halted their rhythmic movement and squared about to face him.

"What are you laughing at?" she demanded suspiciously. "Nobody said anything."

He drew her back into his arm. "Was I laughing? I didn't know it. But there's laughter inside of me and I suppose it oozed out to the surface."

"If you are thinking something funny, you ought to tell me. I like laughing, too."

"It isn't really funny and it's nothing to laugh at, either. I'm just grinning like a fool because I'm so happy I can't help it."

He was supposed to be happy dancing with her, Donna reflected, and he was happy. Still, his was not ordinarily a grinning pleasure such as she had caught unaware in his eyes and on his lips. "It must be some extra special happiness," she surmised. "Don't be stingy, Mark. Let me in on it."

"You are in on it, all right," he assured her contentedly. "In fact, you are it. All of it. I wasn't going to tell you until we were away from here. Until we were alone. I didn't realize it was sticking out all over me."

"It was," she said. "It still is. Go on, Mark. Tell me."

"Donna," he whispered exultantly, "I got it! The step with the company. Member of the firm! It'll be announced in the papers Monday."

Again Donna halted their dancing. "Mark! No!" she cried joyously.

"Donna! Yes!" His voice, no more than a whisper, was resonant with pleasure.

Donna flung both arms around him and kissed him ecstatically. "Darling, darling!" she cried. "How wonderful! How gorgeous! I'm proud of you!"

All dancing ceased abruptly and their friends crowded about them.

"Congrats! Congrats!"

"Well, it's about time!"

"You promised I can be maid of honor!"

"What's the date? I want to make a note of it!"

"You certainly were slow getting around to it! You'll never catch up with Ed and me!"

"Oh, it hasn't anything to do with me," Donna cried gaily. "It's all Mark! He got a big step. An enormous step! They took him into the firm! He's a podner!"

There were handclasps and shoulder slaps. There were congratulations and moans of envy. There were hints of favors to be asked and jobs to be sought.

"A step's a step, Mark, my lad," he was reminded. "Out of service as well as in."

Mark nodded cheerful acceptance of wartime responsibilities of service "steps" and they moved to the bar.

"On me," he said to the rented bartender. "What'll you have, parasites?"

The party began breaking up soon after. Donna clung to the dregs of it as long as she could, making excuses for delay although Mark tried to hurry her. Someone, she said, had to see that things were wound up properly and she was on the committee. The married couples, she remarked pointedly, tired of dancing much more quickly than in their premarital days. And of course baby sitters doubled their rates after midnight. She reminded Mark of other years when they had danced all night and then, around four or five in the morning, when borrowed maids and rented bartender

had gone, had cooked breakfast for themselves, coffee and bacon and eggs. Before matrimony broke things up and all their good times went to pieces.

"And now, Donna, my darling," Mark said as they were driving homeward through the snow-white night, "I have the honor and great joy to ask you to set the date! And make it soon, sweet, make it soon! Tomorrow, if possible!"

"Mark," she said gently, "do you mean this as—as a proposal?"

Mark laughed with boyish glee. "Nothing else and nothing less," he said heartily. "You know what I did first thing today when they called me in and said it was all settled? I called my tenants and told them to move out of our house. And then I moseyed down town and got your engagement ring. It's in my pocket, if it hasn't eaten a hole right through the lining. I know it's hot! It's been burning me up all night. I'll give it to you as soon as we park."

"You shouldn't have done that, Mark. You shouldn't have done any of those things. You should have talked to me first. Because—I am not going to marry you, Mark. I am not going to get married at all. Ever. I don't like marriage."

Mark laughed again. "Go on, darling," he said happily. "Give me the whole works. Tell me you never dreamed of such a thing and I've taken your breath away and you must take me under advisement. Oh, yes, and you have to ask mamma. And as soon as we park I'll get down on my knees in the snow and do the thing according to Hoyle."

"But I'm not joking, Mark." Her voice though faint was firm. "I'm not surprised. I knew you were going to ask me. Sometime. I put it off as long as I could. I'm not going to get married, Mark. I don't like marriage. I don't like anything about it."

Mark swung the car into the familiar driveway and stopped smoothly. He drew her, warm and yielding, into his arms and kissed her. "Darling," he said huskily, "I have never been so

happy in my life. It was a hellish long time to wait but it's over now."

Donna did not withdraw from him. Her lips met his and clung responsively. When he fumbled in his pocket for the ring she said, "Didn't you hear me, Mark? Weren't you listening? I am not going to get married. I don't want to. I won't."

"Let's not joke about this, sweet," he said. "It's such a thrilling moment and we've waited so long. Let's not joke. Let's just be—altogether happy. Joking is for things that aren't sacred. This is sacred."

"I am not joking." Her soft voice was suddenly stern. "I know all about marriage. I hate it. It's just a civilized form of slavery. And not very civilized, either. I won't have any part of it."

Mark was puzzled but not yet either worried or distressed. It must be temperament, a mood. But he had known Donna all her life, had loved her for eight years. She was never moody, never subject to tempers and temperament. She was a happy, sweet-natured, generous girl, sympathetic, friendly and gay. And he could not believe she was teasing him; she was too sensitive to his feelings and too kind to trifle when his own emotions were deep.

"I thought you loved me, Donna," he said carefully. "You've often said so."

"I did, Mark, I do. I love you with my whole heart. I would die for you. I would do anything in the world to please you. Except marry you."

"You hate marriage more than you love me?" he said tentatively.

"I wouldn't say that, Mark. They aren't comparable. I love you completely. Marriage hasn't anything to do with it."

"Oh, yes, it has, Donna. You're wrong there. Marriage is the natural consequence—the climax, rather, the glorious climax of love. It follows as naturally as the night the day."

"A good comparison," she said dryly. "The black night of slavery after the bright freedom of day."

"Do you think women get the worst of marriage, Donna? Is that it? I suppose they do. I never thought of it that way before. Maybe they do. But aren't there compensations, Donna?"

"Nothing can compensate. And I don't know that women have the worst of it. Not always, anyhow. I don't like marriage for anybody, men or women. Love, yes. Not marriage."

"Wouldn't it have been a little—well, more honest, Donna, to have tipped me off to this beforehand? It's been eight years, you know."

"You never really pinned me down before."

"I didn't know I had to, Donna. I loved you. You said you loved me. I didn't try to pin you down but we certainly talked about marriage and a house, a home and children——"

"You did, Mark. I didn't."

"No," he said slowly, "come to think of it, I guess you never did. You just kissed me with your heart on your lips, and I thought you were a little shy of the subject but in full agreement. About the house, Donna. When Grandfather left me the house, we went over it together and agreed to keep it for our home. We said we wouldn't make improvements for tenants but would wait and have it done our way. For us."

"You said those things, Mark. I didn't."

"No. That's right. You just kissed me and I didn't understand. When we went over the furnishings and set apart for storage the nice old things we would want later when it was our home, and I picked out all the choice pieces for you——"

"I didn't say I wanted them, Mark," she interrupted quickly. "Don't you remember? I always said, 'This is lovely, Mark, you'll want this.' I never said 'I.' Did I, Mark? Did I ever say, 'I want that'?"

"No. I guess you never did. Why have you bothered with me so long, Donna, so many years, if you don't want me?"

"I do want you, Mark. I want you desperately. You are the dearest, most precious thing in the world to me. I want you with all my heart. But not in marriage."

"That could be taken two ways, Donna."

"I mean it two ways, Mark. I do want you and I want you to have me. Any time. Whenever you like. But not in marriage."

"Thanks," he said bitterly. "When I get over being in love with you I may take you up on that."

Donna pressed closely against him and both her hands closed over his.

"Do you remember one night, Donna, when you looked so very lovely—a blue and gold dress you were wearing—and I said if our children didn't take after you, I would spank them?"

"I didn't say anything, did I? Did I say anything, Mark?"

"No. Come to think of it, you didn't. You came over and sat on my lap and kissed me. I thought it was just your sweet way of thanking me for the compliment. I meant it for a compliment. How could I have been such a fool, for eight years? Have you felt this way for eight years, Donna?"

"Yes." Her voice was a whisper.

"But why did you keep me hanging around, Donna? For eight years! Why?"

"Because I love you, Mark. Because I want you. And we have been very happy."

"Yeh, so we have. Very happy. I in my fool's paradise and you in your little spider web. Very happy."

"Maybe it would have been more honest, Mark, if I had told you, if I had said something. But you didn't really ask me, Mark. And I always wanted you. I still do."

"Are you so crazy about your job, Donna? Is that it?"

"No. I'm not a bit crazy about the job. It's a good one and I have to work to be independent. That's all. I don't care about a career and I know I am no genius. I'll never really amount to anything. I am not even ambitious. If I had enough money to live

on, live by myself, I mean, independently, I wouldn't work at all."

"You'd just rather work, even at a job you don't care about, than be married to me. Is that it?"

"I just don't want to be married, Mark. That's all. I love you more than anything or anybody in the world. It's nothing against you. It's just marriage, being married."

"Do you mean the marriage relationship, Donna?" he asked diffidently. "Is that what you are afraid of?"

"No. I am not afraid of that. I know what you mean. You mean what they call the consummation of marriage. I'm not a bit afraid of that. I want that. But I want it without marriage."

"It's the responsibility of marriage you don't want," he said coldly. "The worries, the work, the chance of heartache. You want to be free to step out from under when the fun bogs down and the burdens pile up."

"It's marriage," she said despondently. "It's everything about marriage."

"Everything but the fun," he reminded her.

She offered no denial.

Suddenly Mark turned. He took her in his arms, holding her tightly, and kissed her again and again. And again. Donna, taking his face between her two hands, held it to hers and would not release it.

"Kiss me again, Mark. Kiss me forever."

Their lips clung together, trembling. Their breathing was one breath, hot upon their two faces.

"Darling, darling." Her lips whispered against him. "It's love that counts. Only love. This is love. Darling, love is enough." When he moved to raise his face from hers, she clasped both hands behind his head. "No!" she whispered hotly. "Stay, Mark. You're mine, Mark. You know you're mine. Put your lips back, Mark. Love me! Love me harder! Hurt me, Mark!"

Mark's withdrawal was rough. Donna, repulsed from his arms,

sighed tremulously and relaxed against the cushions. He lighted a cigarette with shaking fingers.

"Love that won't stand up to anything tougher than a kiss," he said harshly, "isn't worth a good goddamn and I don't want it. I don't ask much of life, but by God, I want more than that."

Donna was shaken. She drooped in the seat beside him, motionless, silent, breathing in troubled, childish sighs.

Mark finished his cigarette and tossed the butt out into the snowy drive.

"That would seem to be about all," he said quietly. "Shall I take you in now?"

Without waiting for a reply he got out and crossed around to her side of the car. Always on snowy nights, when she was in evening slippers and gown, he had carried her the few feet from the drive to the porch. On this night, too, he carried her. And on this night, instead of dropping dancingly to the floor, she clung to him with tight arms.

"Mark," she whispered, "won't you just keep me—and stay with me—without any marriage?"

He pushed away the encircling arms and thudded her roughly to the floor.

"No, damn you, I won't!" he said, and strode away to the car.

So Donna sat in the warmth of the down comfort in the big chair and stared into the pale night until gray morning crept across the snowy landscape.

2

DONNA'S parents, Jean and Alan Collwell, had their usual quiet Sunday morning breakfast together.

"Church this morning?" Alan smiled as he asked the question and his wife laughed as she shook her head.

Neither question nor answer was needed. They understood each other too well for that. They wanted to be on hand for Donna's gay account of the party the night before. They were interested in her young friends and all their young affairs. They had known most of them from childhood. Their parents were their own lifelong friends.

Donna would sleep late, they knew. They were in no hurry. The first recital was worth waiting for.

When Alan retired to the living room with the Sunday paper and Jean busied herself with preparations for a mid-day dinner and afternoon tea and supper, both unconsciously kept ears alertly turned to the upstairs for first evidence of Donna's awakening. From long custom, after the sound of running water Jean could estimate almost to the instant when to start a fresh pot of coffee and take the fruit from the ice.

On this December morning the waiting was long. It was one o'clock and dinner was already under way before they heard the first faint sounds of movement from Donna's room. Jean Collwell glanced at the clock and began setting the table for two o'clock dinner. So near the dinner hour, Donna would be wanting no more than coffee. Strong coffee.

Jean's timing was less accurate than usual because Donna was

slower. The minute hand had passed the halfway mark before her lightly running feet came padding down the softly carpeted stairs. Her mother poured three cups of coffee.

Donna Collwell could not properly have been called beautiful but the unusualness of her appearance gave an impression of beauty. Her skin was of complete whiteness, not pale, the fresh glowing whiteness of a baby's flesh. Her features, except for her eyes, were small and finely chiseled. Her hair, of surprising blondness, was neither yellow nor golden, but rather a sun-bleached silver that formed a shining halo for her face. Her eyes were of bewildering darkness, a midnight purple almost black, large, soft and limpid behind short thick lashes, a velvety darkness like that of pansies.

On this morning she wore a silky, gold-colored blouse tucked under the belt of tailored slacks. Her sandals were of gilded leather. Donna wore gold a great deal. Gold brought out the heart in her pansy-purple eyes.

"Dad, you put that watch right back in your pocket!" she began cheerfully, as she saw him waiting for her in the doorway of the dining room. She sank into her chair at the side of the table and reached for her cup. "All my memories of you, Dad, are watch-in-hand. From the cradle up. Six o'clock—'Time for Donna's bottle.' Seven o'clock—'Donna's bedtime.' Ten o'clock—'Time for those high school kids to be taking themselves off home.' Twelve o'clock—'High time you were getting in, young lady.' Three o'clock—'An indecent hour to be getting in.' And here we are now, one-thirty P.M.—'And Donna just getting down to breakfast.' "

He laughingly pocketed his watch and accepted coffee at the head of the table.

"It's only twenty minutes until dinner," her mother announced, "so we may as well stay parked at the table. I'm glad I planned a dinner that doesn't have to be watched every minute." She, too, sat down and looked expectantly at her daughter.

Donna rose buoyantly to their expectations. Her face was bright and untroubled, her smile responsively quick.

"It was very nice," she began. "Everything went off like clockwork. And there is news, too! Big news! I'll give you twenty guesses as to who constituted the big news of the evening."

They could not guess.

"Mark Banister," she proclaimed importantly and then, forestalling the sudden questioning of their eyes, she hurried on. "Yes, sir. Old Mark in person! He has a promotion. He is a podner in the firm. Boost in salary and all concomitants. It's to be announced in the New York papers tomorrow. He was the Lion of the Lakeside."

She nodded happy corroboration of their exclamations of pleasure.

"Oh, he's as pleased as a new papa with a set of quads. He danced around grinning like—whatever grins the hardest—until we finally put the screws on and elicited the wherefore. Then he had to set up drinks for everybody. A pretty penny that set him back! For everybody, mind you! Even strangers! Even those infants that have only been off the nursing bottle a couple of years or so. The place just reeked with congratulations and envy. All the boys began asking for good jobs and all the girls wanted to dance with him, never having danced with a bona fide podner before. It was quite gay."

"Wait a minute until I turn the chicken." Her mother hurried away and hurried back, while Donna obligingly waited.

"Annette was there," she went on. "She looked very nice. A new dress, smart, becoming, but not showy. She was a little quiet, rather dignified. I thought she carried it off very well. Mark thought so, too."

"Was—her new friend with her?"

"Yes. His name is Paul Acheson. He made a good impression. Solid-looking, businesslike. No hell-raiser. Mark made it a point

to talk to him quite a lot and he liked him. He said he spoke very nicely about Annette and about little Davie, too."

"Do you think it's serious, Donna?"

"I shouldn't be surprised. Mark thinks so. Annette did not say, of course. But she introduced him all round and when she came to me she said, 'This is David's sister, Donna.' And he shook hands with me though of course he hadn't with the other girls. It showed he was wise to the family tie-up. A good handshake. Man back of it."

"I'm glad of that."

"She asked if it was all right to bring him over to meet you today and I said yes and asked them for supper. But they can't come for supper. They are going to Ridgewood, to Annette's sister's, and taking Davie with them."

"Will she bring Davie with her this afternoon?"

"Yes. They left the party quite early. Annette says her mother feels so responsible when she is left alone with Davie that she never closes her eyes until Annette gets home."

"I could keep Davie while they go to Ridgewood."

"I think they want to take him. After all, if it is serious, he must get acquainted with the small fry of his future."

"Hold everything," her mother broke in again. "I can serve dinner now. It will only take a few minutes."

While they ate, Donna maintained a running account of the latest doings of all her group. She poked fun at her friends, amusingly, without barbs and without venom. There was no malice in Donna.

"On the whole," she said cheerfully, "the gang has gone to the dogs. Except Mark and me. Do you know the depths to which their conversation has degenerated? Babies and high prices with the girls. Jobs and high prices with the boys." She pointed her knife accusingly at her mother. "Did you know," she demanded severely, "that unless an infant gains so many milligrams every

twenty minutes you have to call in a specialist to concoct a new formula?"

"No" was the smiling answer. "It wasn't required when I was having babies."

Donna turned to her father. "And did you know that unless UN abolishes the vote along with the veto and the World Bank sets up an international control of peanut oil the world economic structure is going to explode sky-high and you'll have to sell the car and walk to work—if you have shoes?"

"Maybe we'd better dig up the flowers and plant peanuts," he suggested cheerfully.

"You haven't required a baby sitter for quite a while," Donna went on, "so it may surprise you to know that if you keep one after midnight you have to declare a dividend and give her stock in the house and furniture. Babies! The mothers ganged up on the committee of which I am chairman and laid us out cold for not having telephone service resumed just for last night."

"For fear of some emergency?"

"Oh, no. Just so they could call up and hear the little cherubs snore. Ed and Erna made one flying trip home in the middle of things. Toodles had a runny nose. They came back much relieved. It wasn't any runnier. The consensus, Mark and I not voting, is that the United States Health Service was woefully remiss in not prohibiting the production of babies before the advent of the Didie Wash. Them babies wasn't brought up sanitary."

"Were you a little jealous?" her father inquired.

The pansy eyes rolled expressively ceilingward. "Me? I felt as if Truman had just plagiarized an up-to-date Emancipation Proclamation exclusively for me and other old maids. Brother, let Freedom ring!"

When her father had retired again with his paper and Donna was washing dishes while her mother made sandwiches for the expected afternoon influx of callers, she turned suddenly and said brightly, "Oh, by the way, Mother, you may as well have all the

low-down. Mark broke down last night and actually committed a proposal! Think of that! And after all these years!"

Her mother stopped short in her work, hands in midair, eyes wide with pleased anticipation. "He—he really . . ."

Donna nodded briskly. "Right the first time. He asked me to set the date. In so many words." Donna's smile was unwavering.

"I can't say I am entirely surprised," her mother admitted smilingly.

"Neither was I. I turned him down with my usual unladylike frankness. No marriage bells for little Donna."

That shocked her mother into breathless immobility.

"You—you said—no, Donna?" she asked faintly.

"I said no, period, exclamation point, new paragraph. Unquote."

"But—why, Donna? I have always thought—your father and I have talked about it—we both thought you loved Mark."

"So I do," she said briskly and her smile remained. "Certainly I love him. But you don't have to marry everybody you love, do you?"

"N-no. I suppose not. One rather expects it though. Or perhaps I'm just old-fashioned." She was troubled and made no effort to conceal her perturbation. "Is it . . . Are you so fond of your job, Donna?"

Donna laughed. "Mark's very words! No, it most definitely is not the job. The job is no thriller. But I'd rather have it than a husband."

"Is there someone in New York, Donna? Someone we haven't met?"

"Now there, Mother, you're one up on Mark! Even he never thought of that!" she said admiringly. "No, darling, there isn't anybody else. There isn't anybody. I just don't want to get married, that's all. I like things the way they are."

"Maybe you do now, Donna," her mother said gently, "but you won't very long. And things won't stay the way they are. You

may laugh at the girls now, and their babies, and their bills and their didie washes, but you won't be laughing long."

"While there's life there's laughter," Donna said gaily.

"Was Mark—upset about it?" was the diffident query.

"I can't say that he acted very heartbroken but I've had no personal experience with broken hearts. His parting words last night were damn me."

"Damn you! Mark?" She was incredulous.

"Oh, I don't think he meant it literally. He was really on a rampage last night, what with the new job and proposing and all. He got confused and said damn instead of good night. He thinks I should have told him a long time ago."

"I am afraid I think so, too, Donna."

"Well, to be honest, I think probably you are both right. But I am no angel. I suppose I was plain selfish. I wanted to hang on to him as long as I could."

"Without marrying him, you mean?"

"Yes. Without marrying him. So until he actually pinned me down to a date I just kept stalling. I suppose he has a right to grouse about it, if he wants to. And evidently he wants to. You'd better turn a few handsprings with those sandwiches, Mother. It's three o'clock."

Donna finished up the dishes, efficiently mopped out the sink and rinsed the dish cloths.

"I think I'll dash down and say hello to Aunt Maudie," she said. "There's plenty of time. Annette will not be here until after four."

"Why don't you take the car?"

"I'd rather walk. The snow is lovely. First snows always are. We don't get the effect of it on Broadway. I'll just pull my ski pants over the slacks. I'll be right back."

Her mother stood soberly at the window watching Donna's half-running, half-sliding departure down the snowy street. Then

she went to the living room where her husband still busied himself with the Sunday paper.

"Alan."

Her changed voice showed in the one familiar word. He dropped the paper.

"What's the matter, Jeanie?"

"Donna." Her voice was husky and a little tremulous. "Something's wrong, Alan. Something's terribly wrong. She isn't going to marry Mark."

He smiled comfortingly. "There's no hurry," he said. "She's young yet. The longer she sticks around home the better I like it."

Mrs. Collwell shook her head worryingly. "It isn't just time, Alan. It's forever. He asked her and she—she just refused—point-blank. She said so."

"That's odd. Seems to me she's been in love with him ever since I can remember."

"She still is. At least she says she is. But she won't marry him. She told him and she told me."

"If she isn't going to marry him, sometime, seems to me she's been playing mighty fast and loose somewhere. Mark certainly wants her."

"Yes. But she doesn't want him. I—I don't know what to make of it."

"Has she met up with some glamour guy over in New York who's turned her head?" he asked suspiciously.

"She says absolutely not. Nobody but Mark. And she doesn't want him."

"She's pulling a fast one somewhere," he said conclusively. "She must be. Maybe he waited too long to ask her and she's trying to punish him. Otherwise it doesn't make sense."

"No. It doesn't make sense. That's what bothers me. I can't help believing her, Alan. Donna—Donna does not lie."

"Not with her lips, maybe," he said reasonably. "But there

never lived a woman without her own private brand of inner guile. It doesn't add up. Does she seem upset or worried?"

"Not a bit. You saw her. Happy, pleased about everything just as she always is. But I'm not happy. I'm not pleased about anything. I don't like it, Alan."

"There's nothing we can do about it, Jeanie," he said reassuringly. "Donna's twenty-four years old. Her love life is her own affair."

"Yes. I know. I wouldn't want to interfere. But it seems so . . . very . . . unlike Donna. When she stood there telling me about it, smiling . . . that sweet smile she has—her eyes shining with that little sparkle of gold she gets sometimes—I had the strangest feeling, Alan."

"I can imagine you were surprised," he said mildly. "I am, too."

"It was more than that. I had the feeling, Alan, that Donna is a stranger. That she is someone I do not know. I felt like an outsider. An outsider with my own daughter, Alan! Can you explain that?"

"It was the surprise of it," he said soothingly. "We have always understood her so well and been so completely in sympathy with her—and now, well, for the first time, there is something we do not understand. That's all. But there's nothing we can do about it. I suppose he won't be over this afternoon?"

"I shouldn't think so. She did not mention it. No, after what happened, I am sure he will not come."

But Mark Banister came. It was nearly six o'clock when he arrived and already the others were making tentative gestures toward departure, mindful of feeding and sleeping schedules. Mary Lou and Avery had brought the baby with them and it was now asleep on an upstairs bed. Kitty had brought her two-year-old on a sled and he was engaged in unremitting tugs of war with little Davie over the old toys stored in the drawer below the built-in bookshelves.

"My daddy's ca'!" "My daddy's ba'!" "My daddy's choo-choo!" had been Davie's passionate, possessive chant throughout the hour.

It had not been easy for Annette to bring a new friend along with her young son to the Collwell home that afternoon. She had to, of course. This town was her home. Donna's friends were her friends. Jean and Alan were little Davie's grandparents.

It had not been easy for the Collwells either. Their hospitality had not faltered but they couldn't help watching the new young man, surreptitiously appraising him. Especially they noted his every intonation and gesture toward little Davie. They loved Annette, but little Davie was David's son.

Donna's happy laughter and infectious gaiety had carried the afternoon along until Mark Banister came.

"Hi, Donna! Hi, gang!" His greeting was cheerful enough. "Hello, Dad and Mom Collwell. Glad to see you again, Acheson." He singled out Annette's stranger with a quick, friendly handshake. "Where's your manners, young Dave? No respect for your elders?"

Little Davie advanced solemnly with outthrust hand but when Mark offered his in greeting, Davie withdrew quickly.

"Gimme," he said succinctly.

Mark laughed. "Here you are," he said, producing a small rubber pistol from his pocket. "And look at this, you bandit. It's the kind real robbers use. It's got a silencer on. See? Not a sound! No click. No nothing. You can drop a guy with this and he won't even know he's dead. In consideration of my own eardrums," he explained to the others as Davie withdrew importantly with his prize.

Though her parents watched closely, expectant, fearful and hopeful, they could discern no change in Donna at Mark's entrance. Her lips smiled. Her wide eyes received no screening from the thick dark lashes.

"Well, did you spill the news about the engagement, Donna?" Mark asked, with incisive distinctiveness.

"Certainly not. There isn't any engagement. There isn't any news to spill."

"That's what I mean. The unengagement. That's very important. I'll do it, Donna. It will sound better, coming from me. It would look like turning a knife in the wound if you did it. Ladies and gentlemen," he said, his voice clear in the sudden hush of the pleasant room, "I have the heartbreaking honor to inform you that Donna's and my state of unengagement has now become permanent and binding." He paused for anticipated ejaculations but there were none. "I solemnly, if not on bended knee, proposed to her last night and she unequivocally rejected me. Our unengagement is now authentic."

There were slight coughs and throat-clearings.

"Well," said Mary Lou, breaking a strained silence, "speaking as a dear friend, I think you're a fool, Donna. Mark Banisters do not grow on every tree."

Avery rallied slowly. "Congratulations, Donna," he said. "You're well out of a sorry mess. I've known Mark all his life and think less of him, husbandly speaking, every day."

"Pretty dog-in-the-mangerish, though, to keep him on leash so long," complained Erna. "If I'd had a choice between him and Ed . . . I really . . . don't know," she ended reflectively.

There was laughter then but not without its embarrassment.

"Anyhow," Mark said reassuringly, "you will be glad to know that Donna's in the market and you can now invite her out without polishing up an extra knife and fork for me."

"Does the same go for Mark, Donna?" asked Mary Lou.

Donna laughed. "Why not? And for that matter, how do I know what's been going on while I've been chained to my job? I never yet heard of a man getting to be a full-fledged podner without a double or treble life in the offing."

Even with this surprising denouement, the young parents did not forget their domestic schedules and began collecting their various offspring, regretfully declining Mrs. Collwell's slightly feverish invitation to remain for supper.

"You'll have to stay, Mark," she said at last in some desperation. "Dad and I are too old to live on sandwiches and salad all next week and the icebox is loaded."

"Okay," he assented pleasantly. "Nobody else has invited me anyhow."

"Donna, why don't you and Mark come over for bridge later? About nine. The babies will be asleep then," Erna suggested nervously.

"Not tonight, darling, thanks. Give us a rain check. I have to catch the eight o'clock bus to the city. Have to make up for taking Friday off to work on the party. Don't forget to ask us again some time."

That evening, when Mark was driving Donna to the station to catch her bus for New York, she said evenly, "Did you have to do that, Mark? About the engagement, I mean. Broadcasting it that way."

"You mean the unengagement, don't you?" he reminded her. "Yes, I think so. They are our friends. They have been expecting things for a long time and it is better to have them know the facts instead of snooping around trying to verify their surmises."

"But there isn't any change, Mark. We are still just where we were before. We still love each other, don't we?"

"I do. As of the moment. But there is a change, Donna. I know now for the first time that my love has no place to go."

"It can stay with me, Mark. I want it to stay with me. We've had such happy times, Mark. We can go on having them. Wouldn't we be rather—well, asinine—to give up something we know is precious and perfect for—for the horrible potentialities of marital respectability?"

"Yes. Very asinine—if that's the way you feel about it."

"You aren't interested in anything but just marrying a woman and plunking her into your house—and leaving her there?"

"Living there with her, in my version of it. But I'm not much interested in that right now. However, if you happen to change your mind before I change mine, you might let me know."

"Are you in such a hurry to get started?"

"Yes. It's going to take time, I know. But I am not going to do anything to slow down the operation, you can bet on that. And anything I can do to speed it up, I will do."

"Then you may as well get started, Mark. I am not going to change my mind."

3

WHEN Donna had first suggested taking a room in New York to circumvent the hazards of commutation, it had seemed entirely reasonable and even desirable. Donna's suggestions were always reasonable and nearly always desirable. It was during the war, the time of gas rationing, car pooling, crowded busses, congested subways. Her father also commuted from New Jersey to New York but their hours did not coincide and his business required him to spend at least a week every month in Chicago. Because of the shortage of help she was frequently obliged to work late at night and make the long trek to New Jersey at hours that her mother, along with the police departments of two states, considered downright dangerous for an attractive young woman.

It was at a home dinner on Saturday night, alone with her parents, that she first launched the proposal and she did it with a casual offhandedness that made it seem entirely tentative and subject to debate. What would they think of her taking a room in town for the nights she had to work late? She knew some business girls who were going to have a vacancy in their apartment and she could have the room if she wanted it. Under interested pressure for details, her account of the unprecedented opportunity to acquire comfortable and reasonable New York accommodations gave the impression of a heaven-sent boon.

Six girls of her acquaintance had solved their drastic housing predicaments by taking a large apartment together, pooling both the advantages and the expenses. It was a "nice apartment" at a "good address." The girls were high-class, strictly top-notch.

One, withdrawing from business to enter matrimony, was creating the vacancy and although other friends were clamoring for her quarters, they had unanimously agreed to give Donna first chance at it.

The decision had to be made promptly. The remaining five members of the small project, though "nice," were strictly "business." They did not want to shoulder the expenses of their departing collaborator for so much as a day and there was no necessity for doing so. Beds, with or without private rooms accompanying, were in hot demand. That this bed carried a room along with it raised it to the status of luxury.

"Should I should, or should I shouldn't?" she asked.

Speaking in terms of finance, there would be very little difference, considering transportation, taxicabs and dinners in town. In the apartment, the girls bought their own food and had their breakfasts and dinners *en famille*. And no extravagance. And, as she said, it would be convenient to have a dumping place in town for all the papers and books required in her work in radio research.

"I will have to furnish my own bed and bath linens, though, and my own blankets," she explained. "I have to make my own bed, too, and keep my room tidy. I fancy they are a little fussy about some things. I will have to pay for my share of the food when I am in town and lend a hand at the shopping and odd chores and what-not. But as soon as we get back on a five-day week there will be only four nights of it anyhow. And maybe being in town I will have extra time to do some extraneous work on the side, to stand me in good stead when the soldiers come marching home and want all the jobs back. Maybe I can even wangle a raise."

Reasonable and desirable. Her parents could not deny it. They were pleased rather than disconcerted and when Donna went to the telephone and dialed a New York number, they listened closely, but they were smiling.

"Hello. Sammy? Donna. When does the rent start? . . . Yes, Mother and Dad think it is a grand idea. . . . Next week? Okay. If we can scare up a coupon I'll pop in with my bathrobe and toothbrush some time Saturday afternoon but I won't be in to stay until Sunday evening. Usually I stay at home Sunday night but I'll strain a point this time, to make sure my claim is properly staked. . . . Thanks, Sammy, I'll mail you a check Monday morning. 'By, now."

Smiling, she returned to the table. "They're very glad I'm coming and that, my loves, is a compliment. They're really snooty about who moves in there."

"Did you say 'Sammy'?"

Donna laughed. "Samuela, darling. Samuela Ingram. A most respectable name. You've heard of old Sam Ingram, haven't you? Boston Back Bay. Well, he had this daughter instead of a son, so she is Samuela. The girl in my future room moves out next Friday so I start paying rent on Saturday."

On the whole, they were relieved and gratified. On nights when she needed to stay in town, she had a place to stay. And she could still come home any night she wanted to. She would get more sleep too, for the commuting took an hour and a half each way. Three hours of quiet rest and comfort in place of the bustle and rush of commuting!

Donna was very casual about the whole thing. When her mother asked if they should begin packing up and sorting out the things she should take with her, Donna turned on her in gay accusal.

"Are you trying to get rid of me?" she demanded. "I'm not moving out! I don't have to pack up! I live here. Or had you forgotten?"

With Donna taking it like that, there could be no sense of change or upheaval. Just something reasonable and desirable, and attained by unbelievably good luck.

On Saturday her father dutifully produced a coupon for gas to

facilitate her haphazard removal but even then there was nothing upsetting about it. It was not nearly so tragic as when she first went away to college. They had wept then, and Donna had wept with them. She chucked a battered suitcase into the trunk compartment of the car and tossed in a few books alongside. She laid the stack of linens and blankets neatly on the rear seat, laughing at the "Donna Collwell" in red markers which her mother had painstakingly attached to those rare items.

"Get me a laundry hamper, Mom," she said gleefully. "I'll bring my messed-up linens home for their ivory-flaking."

There was nothing to be downcast about and nobody was downcast. Donna frowned when her mother put an armful of garden flowers on the seat, and Dad trudged out with a basket of peaches and tomatoes and green peppers. Donna frowned. But the frown was all between her eyebrows, while her lips smiled and her dark eyes sparkled golden glints.

"I'm going to charge them for these," she said grimly. "They told me this is stee-rictly business from beginning to end and I'm not going to begin coddling them."

She was at home again in ample time for dinner.

"They pulled a fast one on me," she reported cheerfully. "Strictly business and then some! They divide the rent but it is on a preferential basis. Sammy has the master bedroom and she pays two dollars extra for that. Another girl has the small sitting room adjoining, and she and Sammy have that bathroom between them. That girl pays a dollar extra for rating half a bath. The three other girls have the ordinary rooms and go thirds on their bath. Those are the cheap quarters. The prize accommodation is—guess what? The maid's room off the kitchen. It has its own absolutely private bath, not very big and not a bit elegant, but they have fixed it up very cutely and it's quite nice. They charge two dollars extra for that. Nona Forham had it but she wants to cut down on her overhead so she talked me into swap-

ping with her. I figured the private bath was well worth it, and the room is farther away and less accessible so she is moving out and I am moving in."

Her parents could but agree that such privacy was well worth two dollars. Donna had always been careful with money. She took her time, shopped carefully and always got her money's worth. Her allowance, starting with ten cents a week when she entered kindergarten, had increased through the years but from the beginning she had husbanded it shrewdly. When she was receiving thirty-five cents a week and her brother David and his friend, Mark Banister, were collecting a dollar each, many times, by the end of the week, they were borrowing nickels and dimes from her.

When she went to college, she was given the responsibility of her first checking account and never failed to make her deposits go just a little farther than was required. When she collected her first salary after starting to work in New York, she smilingly shoved back to her father the weekly check he passed across the table to her.

"Economic unit now, Dad. Standing on my own little trilbies and all that hooey."

He nodded, laughing, and pocketed the check. "When you want back on the domestic pay roll, just serve notice," he said.

She had never gone back on the domestic pay roll.

On her twenty-first birthday, her Aunt Maude had given her a check for five thousand dollars. When Donna cried out protestingly at the surprising generosity of the gift, her aunt said crisply, "I had you down in my will for that much and I thought you might get more fun out of it now than later on. Besides, I can cut you out of my will now and you needn't go around asking about my health and wondering how much longer I am going to live."

Donna had put that money into government bonds.

Her parents had never had any financial worries about Donna. They had never had any worries about her at all. Donna was no source of uneasiness to her parents or to her friends.

During the week that followed her first assumption of New York residence, there were three days of extremely inclement weather, with rains and gales of near-hurricane proportions. What a blessing that Donna had a quiet room in a nice place right there in town! Jean Collwell devoutly thanked God that her daughter had fallen heir to such priceless privilege.

Her removal, over a period of weeks, was so gradual as to be virtually unnoticeable. A suitcase of clothing now and then, and a hatbox, a clock, a vase, a few books and pictures. Donna still lived at home. Always she returned for week ends and frequently on extra nights during the week, especially when Mark Banister was at home on leave or others of her especial friends were furloughed from wartime obligations.

Reasonable and desirable, from every point of view.

On one day when Donna had an afternoon off from her work she invited her mother for luncheon and a matinee, and as they were giving their orders she remarked offhandedly, "If we do not dawdle too much over our food we will have time to catch a bus uptown to give you a look at the boardinghouse before the matinee."

They had not dawdled. Mrs. Collwell's interest in Donna's intermittent city residence very nearly reached the depths of downright curiosity.

The address was a good one, in the east Sixties just off Fifth Avenue. The street was quiet, safe-looking. The six-story apartment house was dignified if not impressive, just as Donna had described it. The reception room on the ground floor was pleasantly but not elaborately furnished. There was no desk, no clerk. Donna got her mail from her own box and the elevator was self-serviced.

"June, that's the maid," Donna explained as they passed down

the corridor, "will not be here yet. She comes in about four. She does the living rooms and baths and prepares our dinner. We do all our own chambermaiding and pretty good we are, too, says she, modestly."

Mrs. Collwell smilingly inspected the living and dining rooms. They were tastefully and comfortably arranged, unpretentious, yet with a certain quiet and artistic elegance that was highly gratifying.

"All the good pieces belong to some of the girls. Sammy Ingram, mostly. Anything they had to buy to eke out was bought cheap, and you may lay to that. But they dug up all they could from their homes and borrowed what they could not beg. Not a bad job, eh?"

"Very nice," Mrs. Collwell agreed happily. "Oh, very nice."

"The servant's quarters, mine you remember, are off the kitchen," Donna reminded her mother, leading the way down the wide, softly lighted hall.

Her mother glanced with interested questioning in her eyes at the closed doors.

"We never open one another's doors," Donna answered the querying look. "It's one of the unwritten rules, unwritten but firmly established. We are so strictly private in our own quarters that we have little doorplates so we can turn the sleepy side out when we do not want company. They had some trouble over that at first—long before I came. Some of the girls would simply move in on others and stay for hours when their unwilling hostesses wanted to read or write or go to bed, and were stuck with uninvited and unwanted company! So they put a stop to that. Now, anybody who feels social can go to the living room; that's what it's for."

"A very good idea," Mrs. Collwell agreed heartily. "Girls can be such a nuisance that way."

In the kitchen doorway she paused and smiled with quick approval. "This is nice."

"Yes, it's really somepin. As nearly perfect as the mechanical era has attained so far. And all the gadgets work, too. This is my personal portal."

She stood back to let her mother enter before her. Mrs. Collwell stood quite still in the center of the small room, gazing about on all sides with fond solicitude. Immaculate, cheerful, thoroughly livable. Flowers, magazines and books on the tables; well-placed, good-looking lamps; her photograph and Dad's, and Mark Banister's in uniform, on the desk.

"This is lovely, Donna. I am so glad you paid the extra two dollars. It is more than worth it. How very fortunate you were, in these times, to come into accommodations like these!"

"Yes, my good stars were certainly on the way up. We have a waiting list about as long as *Burke's Peerage*. Maybe longer. The girls are fussy about the joiners. And even when you get in, you have to mind the well-known p's and q's. If a couple of the others decide they can't put up with you, out you go. You have to sign an agreement to that effect before you move in."

"That seems a little unfair, doesn't it?"

"They don't think so. They want to live happily as well as cheaply. They figure if there is a small feud going on in the house, nobody is comfortable. They aren't together very much, but when they are they want to enjoy it. They have certainly safeguarded everybody's independence in every way possible."

"It's just perfect, Donna. I can't tell you how pleased I am. Your father will be so glad. Do you like the other girls, Donna? Are they congenial? Are they all nice?"

"You bet they're nice or they wouldn't be staying here." Donna laughed. "Boy, do they put you through a third degree! It's easier to get a job in the United States Treasury than to bust in here."

"Do they have much trouble? Among themselves, I mean?"

"Not any! And they do not intend to have any. Since I came

everything has been absolutely hunky-dory. They had a little trouble at first. Before my day."

"What kind of trouble?"

"I don't know the details. They never discuss those things. One girl was a snoop. First they suspected her, then they made sure. Then—*pfff!* She's out. They will not have anyone younger than twenty-one and they prefer them around twenty-five. I'm the youngest, believe it or not, old maid like me! And they will not take any girl who is brand-new in town, or on her first job. Everyone in here has to know her way around Manhattan."

"That seems too bad. It would seem an ideal setup for newcomers to town. And new young jobbers, too."

"Yes. Ideal for them but not for the girls in the house. They can't be responsible for nursery clientele. These are all business girls, doing all right for themselves, and they have no time to play nursemaid."

"Donna, why don't you bring that Persian rug in from the den? It will go beautifully in this room and we hardly ever use the den any more."

"Oh, what a keen idea, Mom! I never thought of it. And I can pass this one on to Sue! She was beefing about her rug just the other day, and with good reason. You can absolutely sit and watch the moths work on it. Do you mind if I bring the Persian?"

"Of course not! How silly. And bring anything else you want. Our attic, and the rest of the house, too, is full of nice junk that nobody ever looks at. Bring anything you want."

Mrs. Collwell's report to her husband was ardently enthusiastic and undertoned with profound gratitude. Donna was a lucky girl. She had a safe, sweet place to stay when she had to remain in town. Her mother's face was alight with devout pleasure as she got out the Persian rug for Donna and browsed around the house selecting other small nice comforts that Donna or some of the other girls might enjoy having in their rooms. She smiled con-

tentedly when Donna duly reported back that Sue was down on her knees giving thanks for the rug from the maid's room.

"She offered to make my bed for two weeks in return but she can't because that is against the rules."

"Against the rules? To do things for one another?"

"To work for one another. They fight shy of labor-management problems! Some of the girls who are a little affluent and lazy were willing to pay the others to do their share of the odd jobs. No soap! Everybody works for herself and strictly on her own!"

It was a couple of weeks later when Mrs. Collwell experienced her first faint questioning qualm, but Donna's bright explanation quickly stilled it.

"Why don't you have all the girls come up here for a week end, Donna?" she suggested hospitably. "There's plenty of room and they would enjoy a couple of days in the country."

"That's sweet of you, Mother, but I don't think so," Donna replied.

"I thought you liked them!" Mrs. Collwell was genuinely surprised. Their house had always been home to Donna's friends and to David's.

"I do" was the hasty reassurance. "I like them tremendously much. There! But up here I like the people here. And they all work on that same principle. Maybe in the beginning they had some trouble about mixing up with one another's friends, I don't know. But now there is no mingling of outside friendships at all. And really it is very smart. You know how friends are—in clubs, in sororities, even in church. A few will get very intimate and then all of a sudden someone is jealous of somebody else. Or a couple have a private quarrel and each goes around trying to get everybody else on her side of the argument and first thing you know it is a free-for-all. By keeping their social lives separate from the house life they eliminate a lot of the build-up for friction."

"Yes, I suppose so," she assented doubtfully. "Don't they have any social life? At home, I mean."

"Oh, sure. But they are independent about that, too. There are six girls, and six nights a week. Seven, if you count Sundays. Anyone can ask for exclusive rights to the living room one night a week and get it. Most of them do not, at least not regularly. They go out to shows or parties or dancing—something like that. Sue has a gang of poker friends and once a month, on Sunday night, she has them in for supper and a gambling orgy. The rest just aren't there, or else stay in their rooms. Four of us are fond of bridge and we play quite often. One night I had the gang down from the office for two tables of bridge. I've had people in for bridge several times. On those nights I asked for the living room, dining room and kitchen and had to furnish and serve my own refreshments. It works out marvelously. You can see that if we had to spend every evening being polite to a bunch of somebody else's private friends we wouldn't have much time for ourselves."

"No, I suppose not." There was doubt in her voice.

"Once or twice a year, they all go together and throw a big party. I was invited to a couple of them before I moved in. They were very nice. For those parties they pool expenses and pool the work and pay off all their social I O U's. They roll back the rug and dance in the living room, play bridge or roulette in the dining room and use Sammy's master bedroom as guest chamber. It worked out perfectly. Nobody had time to get intimate enough to start any hell-raising and when you get the different crowds of six different people together there's apt to be a hell-raiser among them."

Mrs. Collwell laughed rather faintly.

Donna sensed her doubt. "They've been ironing out their problems for quite a while, Mother, and as far as I can see they've done a very slick job of it. Thanks mostly to Sammy Ingram.

She's the pin wheel that keeps the works oiled and ticking. I certainly will not be the one to throw a monkey wrench into the machinery."

"Haven't you had Mark there?"

"No, and I do not intend to. I'd rather have my dates with him up here. Oh, of course quite often we go to dinner and a show in town, but no dates at the house. They worked it all out themselves, Mother, and did a very good job. As far as I am concerned, this is my home and that is my hall bedroom. I want to keep my Here here and my There there."

Donna's presentation of the case was incontrovertible. But Mrs. Collwell had always known Donna's friends, from the cradle up through college—Donna's friends, and David's. She wanted to be reasonable about it, however. She tried to assure herself that it was nothing but plain maternal selfishness that gave her a small sense of being shut out. This other life was part of Donna's job, her business. She had always known that mothers, like wives, must remain apart from jobs and business—and from the domestic life of their children when they married. She had managed that to the last exquisite detail with David's wife when David married. She meant to deal as scrupulously with Donna, when Donna married. Married Mark Banister.

Only now Donna was not going to marry Mark Banister.

4

DONNA remained in town during the week after the December party at the Lakeside Club, after Mark's public proclamation of their state of permanent disengagement. She said she was catching up on her work for the time she had taken off for the party. There was nothing surprising in that. She was spending most week nights in town and her week ends in the country were much abbreviated but the change had taken place so gradually, so naturally, as to be virtually unnoticeable. And reasonable, always reasonable. Donna was working hard and progressing steadily in her professional status.

She telephoned her mother that she would be there on Saturday afternoon, arriving rather late. "Christmas shopping not quite early enough," she said.

Mrs. Collwell awaited her coming with pronounced uneasiness. It had been an uneasy week for Mrs. Collwell, trying to adjust herself to the knowledge that Donna only loved Mark in passing as it were and that no marriage was in prospect. It was with distinct relief that she saw her at last, swinging briskly up the street, lugging an ungainly shopping bag and waving her usual cheery greetings to passing neighbors and romping children. For some reason Mrs. Collwell had expected Donna to be downcast, perhaps droopy and wistful. Donna, downcast and wistful, would have suggested some vital, secret significance which her mother had vaguely anticipated.

"Hi, Mother!" Donna greeted her gaily. "See what your good provider has in hand. Heavily in hand! Lobsters! Alive and kicking—and expensive!"

She thrust forward the stout shopping bag, dripping slightly, and apparently crammed with crumpled wet newspapers, newspapers that writhed and wriggled. Her mother laughed, glancing from the ugly bag to the smartly furred figure and the expensively gloved small hands.

"Oh, Donna! Did you lug those horrible things clear out from town on that jam-packed bus?"

"I wasn't jam-packed. Not a bit. Everybody else was, but not Donna and the lobsters. Nobody wanted to close in on me. One wriggle of the wet bag and I had all the breathing space there was."

They went together to the kitchen. Mrs. Collwell put the writhing bag in a dishpan and set a large kettle of water on the gas for boiling.

"Is Mark coming?" she asked naturally enough. Mark nearly always had Saturday night dinner with them, prelude to his evening date with Donna.

"Oh, dear me no, Mother! Have you forgotten? I'm off his list. He didn't so much as call me up all week. The worm! I certainly expected the details anent his broken heart. Of course he hasn't got a broken heart but talking about it is such an uplift to a femme's esprit."

Mrs. Collwell looked searchingly at her daughter. Nothing in Donna's face gave hint of regret or worriment. Her lips were smiling, Donna's old smile, unchanged. Gold lighted up the hearts in her velvety eyes.

"I . . . thought maybe . . ." Her mother began with some diffidence and then plunged on swiftly. "I thought maybe you would see things differently after a week of thinking it over."

"I didn't do any thinking over. It's silly to think of things past. Let the dead past stay dead and buried. My job is thinking of the future."

"I am sorry, Donna" was the grave reply.

"Now, Mother!" Donna protested brightly. "Don't tell me you are one of those matchmaking parents who would force her unwilling chee-ild into the arms of the first eligible young man who proposed to her!"

"I never thought of Mark as an eligible young man."

"You didn't!" she ejaculated in mock amazement. "Well, everybody else did. I certainly did. How else could you think of him?"

"I simply thought of him as a very nice young man, our friend and your sweetheart."

"You are two-thirds right so your IQ is holding up. He is a nice young man and your friend. I think I'll change my garb and go coasting with the kids awhile, Mother. The snow is perfect. All right? You boil the babies and I'll excavate them when I get back. You should be glad Mark isn't coming. More lobster for the rest of us!"

She ran upstairs, humming lightly. Her mother unpackaged the lobster soberly. There was no music in her and no lightness. She did not understand Donna.

Donna returned from her frolic in the snow, rosy-bright and starry-eyed, and switched hurriedly from snow clothes into skirt and sweater, the soft collar of a gold-colored blouse showing effectively at her throat line, and set to work on the lobsters.

The dinner talk was cheerful. Talk was always cheerful when Donna was there. She told amusing little stories of her associates on the radio staff and about her fellow hall-bedroomers, as she persistently called the girls with whom she shared the apartment.

When dinner was over she said if they didn't mind she would dash down to Erna's for a while.

"Toodles is going to have a birthday before long," she explained. "I don't remember just when, everybody keeps having babies so fast these days, but I brought him a present to be on the safe side. They'll know I didn't forget him, even if I did forget

the date. It's one of those cute little musical gadgets where you press a button and everybody begins dancing and doing things. He'll love it. I shan't be gone long."

She slipped into her coat, pulled on her gloves and ran out, bareheaded, her silvery hair shining palely in the dim light.

She had pressed the bell at Erna's house before she realized that Erna had guests. Quite suddenly it occurred to her that too many lights were on and that the faint murmur of talk and laughter was too pronounced for a routine family gathering. But she did not think of withdrawing. Erna's friends were her friends, too.

The bridge table was set up in the living room with end tables conveniently placed for glasses and cigarettes. After a hushed silence, so brief as to be almost imperceptible, she was greeted gaily by three of the players at the bridge table, Erna and Ed and Mark Banister. The fourth was a stranger, a slim, dark, gentle-looking girl. Donna had never seen her before.

"Come and cut in, darling," Erna cried effusively. "Ed needs a respite to go and freshen up our drinks. Oh, Donna, you've never met my cousin, have you? Lois Terrell. This is Donna Collwell, Lois. Lois lives in Cleveland, Ohio, and this is the first time the blessed, benighted lamb has ever been East. Lois, you've heard plenty about Donna Collwell. She's my favorite topic of conversation."

Donna and Lois exchanged the usual polite greetings, pleasant and perfunctory.

"Go ahead and finish out the hand," Donna said firmly. "I see Mark is playing it. We all know how Mark is. If anybody so much as mentions the weather, he blames that when he forgets what has been played. I'll hold my breath till you turn the last trick."

They turned back to the table, laughing.

"May I see the last trick?" Mark asked.

"You see?" Donna demanded indignantly. "He's blaming me already and I haven't said a word."

While Mark was refreshing his memory on the last trick, Erna

winked slyly at Donna, offside, and said frankly, "You see I took you at your word, Donna."

"Why not? My word is better than my bond because my vocabulary is inexhaustible but I haven't a bond to my name."

When the hand was finished, Ed went to the kitchen for fresheners and a glass for Donna, and they shoved slightly away from the table to talk. Donna would not cut in. She said cutting in constituted the dull demise of good bridge. She had only dashed down to leave the small package for Toodles. Her evening was all marked out for her. She was going to take on her father at aceydeucy; she was short of cash right now and needed some extra Christmas picking.

They chatted cordially a few minutes and when Donna rose to go and Ed was holding her coat for her she said pleasantly, "Are you doing anything tomorrow? Can't you all pop up to the house for whatever kind of a supper we can squeeze out of the icebox and our imaginations?"

"Oh, Donna!" Erna said tragically. "I wish we could. How I wish we could! You could never guess what we have on tap for tomorrow. I know, but I still don't believe it. I don't know how I ever got talked into it. We're going slumming. New York, Chinatown, Bowery, statues of so-and-so. We're even going to show Lois Coney Island in its winter coma. Why don't you come along, darling? Agony divided isn't half as agonizing!"

"Not me, thank you. I just came from there. How about you, Mark?"

He shook his head. "Sorry but the slumming is my party. I'm throwing it. I'm the self-elected guide and chauffeur. I had sound reason for that. If I'm running the show, I think I can see that we concentrate on churches from without and bars from within."

Donna gasped admiringly. "Aren't you all brave? The war must have bucked up your morale. All your morales! Is there a plural to morale? There should be."

She refused Mark's offer to drive her home. "How silly," she

said. "I tramp the sin-ridden streets of New York alone all week. I can certainly manage my two pure little country blocks from here home." She extended her hand to Lois with friendly cordiality. "I stay in town all week," she said. "Wage earning and all that tripe. But I'll be up next week end. I'd love to have some kind of party for you then, if Erna hasn't got you all tied up in knots."

Lois said she had to go home on Friday; she had rushed off rather hurriedly on this trip and could not stay longer. But she was appreciative of the offer.

"She's coming back for the Easter vacation," Erna elaborated. "Two weeks of it. We'll have time to plan things up properly then."

"Oh, I almost forgot!" Donna cried. "Toodles!"

Erna started uneasily and her eyes turned quickly toward the stairs.

"What about him?" she asked sharply.

"Tomorrow. When you are slumming. Don't you want me to baby sit for you? You'd be surprised how good I am with babies."

"Babies! You! What do you know about babies?"

"I know everything about them. I ought to. I've heard nothing but babies since you girls began getting them. They have to be dunked and gorged and napped and weighed after each function. Then call your doctor. Do I know about babies?"

Erna thanked her but they had already made arrangements. Her parents, two of them, were coming to spend the day. They were bringing their maid with them, as additional insurance against emergency.

Donna did not run homeward through the still night but immediately on her arrival challenged her father to a game, any game of his choice. "But for money!" she warned him. "Christmas is coming and I am short."

"Weren't they at home?" asked her mother. "You didn't stay long."

"Sure they were at home. They were playing bridge. They wanted me to cut in but that's such a bore. Mark was there, and a cousin of Erna's. Lois somebody. I didn't catch the last name. She's from Cleveland. Very pretty, a brunette. She's coming again for Easter. I offered to give a party for her but she has to go home on Friday."

Donna was busily setting up the table.

A faint flush stained her mother's face. "Well," she remarked crisply, "Erna certainly isn't wasting any time lining up relatives for Mark."

Donna laughed. "She'd be a fool to. Nice guys like Mark aren't left running around loose very long."

"It seems to me she might have given you a few days to—to change your mind, if you want to."

"I don't want to, sweetie pie. And I've had plenty of time. It certainly is not flattering for my parents to be in such a rush to shuffle me off to the first parking place that shows up. Heaven knows I stay out from underfoot as much as possible. Ready, Dad? How about boosting the ante? Christmas is closer and closer."

5

CHRISTMAS approached inexorably.

On Friday evening, the last week end before the holiday, Donna telephoned to Mark Banister. She called him at his apartment, carefully insuring that what she had to say would not pass through interested clerical or switchboard attendants.

"Mark Banister, Podner?" she inquired plaintively. "This is Donna. Donna Collwell, radio research. Remember me?"

"Yes, I remember. One of those New Jersey commuters, as I recall."

"The same. Aren't we still friends, Mark?"

"We couldn't possibly be enemies, could we?"

"I said friends."

"What I feel is not friendship, Donna. It isn't inimical, either. Probably after I get over feeling the way I feel now, it will be—well, one thing or the other."

"Mark, you're spending Christmas with us, aren't you? You always spend Christmas with us."

"Not this year, Donna. So sorry, says he politely. Believe it or not but one of my bosses—I mean my partners—has invited me to spend Christmas Day at his house out on Long Island."

"I'll bet he has a daughter."

"Come to think of it, he has."

"I hope she is cross-eyed and bowlegged and has buckteeth."

"None of those items were at all obvious the last time I saw her."

"But listen, stingy, you're going to help trim the tree Christmas

Eve aren't you? You always do that. We couldn't get it done without you."

"How did you get it done when I was overseas?"

"I did it myself, you brute, and every time I hung up a bauble I kissed it and said 'Merry Christmas, Mark, old top.' "

He laughed. "Like hell you did."

"Well, words and kisses to that effect. You've got to help trim the tree, Mark. Mother's expecting you. Mother's rather off me right now. She needs a bracer. You're very bracing, Mark. You wouldn't want to disappoint an old lady, would you? And besides, she thinks you're nice."

"I can stand her, too. Yes, as a favor to the swiftly decrepiting past generation, I'll be glad to help trim the tree."

"Good! We'll have everything all set to get as much work out of you as possible. Come for dinner, Mark. The usual skimpy rations on Christmas Eve."

"Can't make dinner, Donna. We're throwing an office party that afternoon and I'll be full of food and things. I'll come as early as I can make it."

"Okay, Mark. I hope the daughter has a foul disposition and scratches your eyes out. Be seeing you."

At dinner at home on Saturday she announced, with cheerful venom, that Mark Banister, the louse, was "podnering" on Christmas Day but that he would be on hand to help trim the tree on Christmas Eve. Her parents, unaccountably depressed, were not responsive either to her assumption of venom or of cheer.

"What would you think of asking Annette and Davie over to spend the night and all the holiday with us? We can ask her mother, too. And we can hang a stocking here for Davie. Children are so cheerful to have around the house at Christmas."

Donna and her father agreeing with somewhat exaggerated enthusiasm, Mrs. Collwell went at once to the telephone to convey the invitation.

"Mother Collwell," Annette said briskly, "are you all there?

Dad and Donna, too? Mind if I run over a few minutes? I want to talk about Christmas."

"Yes, of course, Annette. Is it too late to bring Davie with you?"

"I think I'd rather leave him at home tonight. I want to talk."

Mrs. Collwell reported the conversation verbatim, with troubled gravity.

"Maybe she's going to announce her new betrothal," Donna surmised.

"Well, we can't blame her," Mrs. Collwell said courageously. "Annette is so young and so attractive. It is only to be expected."

"More than to be expected," Mr. Collwell said reasonably. "If the young man is all he appears to be, it is greatly to be desired. And approved."

"Yes, I suppose so. Yes, of course."

Annette was pale but her confident self-possession belied her youth.

"About Christmas, Mother Collwell," she said. "Of course we will come for the tree on Christmas morning but we cannot spend the entire holiday. Paul Acheson is going to be with us. His family lives in the West and he cannot take time off for the long trip. So he is coming up with us."

"Bring him along, Annette. There's plenty of room. We'll enjoy having him."

"Will you, Mother Collwell? Are you sure? Not for Christmas Eve but for the tree and Christmas dinner. If you're very sure you want us."

"Of course we want you. And your mother, too. Aunt Maudie will be here. Mark can't come this year."

"Be very sure, Mother Collwell." Annette spoke more hesitantly. "I want you to know Paul. I think you will like him when you know him. I want you to like him. I shall probably marry him, afterwhile. In fact, I am going to marry him."

"We expect to like him, Annette, and we need a chance to get

acquainted. You know we love you, Annette. We want you to be happy. You and Davie."

"I liked him very much, Annette," Donna said helpfully. "He made a grand impression on every one. Mark thinks he's great and you know what a fuss-budget Mark is. Our whole crowd is really interested, Annette, and it's not just nosy interest either. It's because you're part of us and if you want Paul Acheson he's got to put up with the rest of us."

"Thanks, Donna." Annette flashed her a grateful smile. "He liked everybody up here, too. You know how much it means to me." She paused and then went on determinedly. "This is not easy. When we are married, Paul wants to adopt Davie legally. He thinks where Davie is so young he may come very soon to feel that Paul is his real father. He wants that."

Mr. Collwell broke the ensuing silence.

"I have always felt that was the right and honorable procedure in second marriages," he said. "It clears away so many problems. And it shows that a man has the right feeling about things and isn't just planning to put up with a stepchild in order to get a woman he wants."

Mrs. Collwell nodded agreement.

"Paul would like, at the adoption, to have Davie's name changed legally—to Acheson. He suggested David Collwell Acheson instead of David Alan as it is now. Or Alan Collwell Acheson if you would prefer it."

Mrs. Collwell shook her head. "David, I think. Let's keep it David."

"I think so, too," Mr. Collwell agreed heartily. "We can talk over the middle name later on. We may decide we like the David Collwell better. I think it's right to change the name, Annette. It is awkward for children to go around trying to explain why they haven't the same name as their parents. Things should be made just as simple and natural as possible."

"Paul likes children," Annette went on hurriedly. "He was

married once before. Did you know that? They are divorced. Once of those wartime messes. They hadn't any children. He was sorry about that before but he is glad now. He says a kid is entitled to a pair of parents."

"I like everything you say about him, Annette," Mr. Collwell said. "I think we are going to get along all right. If you and Davie like him, he's passed the biggest hazard."

"He certainly doesn't sound like one of these fly-by-night love-'em-and-leave-'em sort, of which the world is far too full," Donna said. "He's evidently thought things through and reached pretty sound decisions. That says a lot for him."

She was rewarded with another grateful smile. "I am not pretending it is the same as with David," Annette went on bravely. "It's not. Nothing ever could be the same. But Paul is very good, pleasant to have around, and I am fond of him. Maybe I even love him. And Mother and Davie are devoted to him."

When Mrs. Collwell excused herself to go upstairs, Annette stared after her for a long instant and then slowly followed.

She tapped softly on the door of her mother-in-law's room.

"May I come in?" she whispered.

Mrs. Collwell opened the door to her. Annette closed it behind her. She put her arms around Mrs. Collwell and the two women wept together, brokenly, their shoulders heaving, their throats scorched with sorrow, wet faces pressed together. They separated at last, almost by spontaneous movement. They laughed, with wet but smiling lips, their eyes still streaming. Mrs. Collwell patted Annette's face with her handkerchief.

"That's enough now," she said.

They went together to the dressing table. Mrs. Collwell opened the powder jar and the puff box and gestured to Annette to help herself and together they set to repairing the facial ravages of their brief emotional tempest.

"We've missed David, Annette," Mrs. Collwell said quietly. "It's

right we should miss him. But David wasn't our entire life and couldn't be. And shouldn't be. I still have Alan and Donna. You have Davie, but a little boy is not enough. David would be the first to say so."

Annette nodded gravely. "Yes, I tell myself that. It wasn't easy to decide, Mother Collwell. Nothing has been easy. Things . . . have been . . . very . . . hard."

"Yes, I know. You've been grand, Annette. We're very proud of you. Donna was proud of you, too, the night of the party with all the old crowd there."

"That wasn't easy, either."

"No. But Donna was proud of you. It wasn't easy bringing him here to us that Sunday either."

"No. That was hardest of all."

"Well, don't get the idea that you are rid of me as a mother-in-law," she said, and spoke more lightly. "I shall horn in on your affairs whenever I feel like it. I shall stand on my rights as Davie's grandmother."

Annette nodded, laughing tearfully. "Changing the name is the hardest of all. Just the name, David Collwell, has always meant so much to me—all my life, from the time I was a kid in pigtails. David was—just wonderful. He was such a grand brother to Donna. Even when we were little, we were jealous of Donna because she had David for her brother. . . . I argued a long time about changing the name. And yet I think he is probably right."

"Yes, that's a little hard for me, too. Just at first. But he is right, Annette. Davie is the one we have to think about. So we're just going to take it, aren't we?"

They went downstairs together, talking lightly of other things, of Christmas and toys and the high price of turkey.

Sunday was a dull day at the Collwells'. The Sunday before Christmas, it was. A dull Sunday at the Collwells', with Donna there! There was a little too much cheery chatter, too much to-do

over Christmas cards and wrappings. When Miriam Alison telephoned and asked Donna to run down for a while, Donna accepted with guilty pleasure.

"Sure, I'll come! What's cookin'?"

"Nothing's cooking. I'm in a jam. We're all in a jam. I made Jigger take the Jug out for a sleigh ride. I want to talk to you, Donna. Alone. Come right away. Hurry!" Miriam's voice was insistent.

"What do you want to talk to me about?" Donna asked warily. Jigger Alison was one of Mark's best friends and Miriam was a party to their friendship.

"About me. About us. About bills and business. I want to ask a favor of you. Hurry up, will you?"

Relieved on that score, Donna went willingly but Miriam's first words were not reassuring.

"Donna, did you mean what you said? That it's all off between you and Mark Banister?"

"I thought you wanted to talk about you."

"I did. I do. This is the preamble. Did you mean it? About you and Mark?"

"We are not engaged and we are not going to get married. Yes. But we are still friends. I hope."

"Oh, Donna, darling, if you'll help me out of this jam, I'll do anything on earth for you. I was half crazy with worry. I didn't know which way to turn. But," she added virtuously, "I certainly wasn't going to stir up any trouble between you and Mark."

"Don't tell me you're in love with him yourself!" Donna ejaculated.

"Oh, it's worse than that. Much worse. Falling in love with Mark would be a picnic compared to the jam I'm in."

Yet her account of the predicament suggested no serious involvement so far as Donna could discover. Her husband, Jigger Alison, had an older brother, one Si Alison. Jigger was devoted to him. Miriam had never met him. He had been good to them.

Now, for the first time, he was coming from California to visit them, to spend the entire Christmas week. Miriam was abject and terrified.

"What are you abject and terrified about?" Donna asked. "Sounds all right to me. In-laws are always popping in on you when you least want and expect them. Don't you have to swear at the altar to take on all your lousy in-laws for better or worse and God help you and them? It sounds all right to me."

"It is all right if you will help," Miriam explained patiently. "I can't swing it alone. Jig's brother is rich and we've got to impress him."

"What do you want me to do? Dress up like a maid and shove things at him on silver salvers?"

"Don't be silly. We certainly aren't going to pretend to be affluent. He knows how poor we are. He ought to know. He's staked us plenty of times. We still haven't paid him off for having the Jug."

"I must be dumber than I thought. I don't get it. I don't get it at all," Donna admitted dolefully.

"You aren't paying attention, that's all," Miriam said impatiently. "I made it perfectly clear. Si is just out of the service and is going to settle down somewhere and put all his money in some business. We want him to let us settle down with him and go into his business. Listen, Donna! You don't know the kind of life we lead! You have plenty of money and everything you want. Do you know that, in addition to not having squared the Jug with Si, we are going behind in our bills every month? We're not living within our income and we can't. I do all my own work, you know that. But Jigger doesn't make enough for us to live on. And, this is confidential, Donna, we're going to have another baby, too. And I supopse Si will have to pay for that."

"Marriage," Donna said thoughtfully. "You never used to be worried about anything, did you? Not till you got married."

"Oh, Donna, being married and having babies is so—so won-

derful, Donna. I mean, it would be wonderful if you weren't always going in debt to pay for things. Don't you see how important it is for us to make a good impression on Si so he will like us and want us to settle down and go into business with him?"

"How did he get all this money if he's Jigger's brother? It smells to me. It reeks. Guys as young as Jigger's brother don't acquire such richness overnight."

"I'll tell you, Donna. But don't you breathe it to a soul. He didn't get rich overnight. He's been rich ever since he was six years old. He inherited it. That just goes to prove that you can't trust your own grandparents!" she ended bitterly.

"Miriam, you dope, talk English. What have our grandparents got to do with it?"

"All right, you dumbbell. Here's a map. Here's a blueprint. Words of one syllable. Grandfather Alison, the old devil, died when Si was six years old. He made a will—before he died, you understand—and left everything he had to Si. And he had plenty."

"What had Jigger done? Stuck a hornet's nest between his blankets?"

"He hadn't done anything. He wasn't even born. The old man evidently figured that since six full years had elapsed there weren't going to be any more grandchildren so he left it all to the one he was sure of. I suppose he thought parents should make the stork an annual event. Anyhow, he abandoned hope and left everything to Si."

Donna, sympathetic by nature, sternly repressed the laughter bubbling within her.

"So what did his parents do, the dopes?" Miriam went on passionately. "They got busy right after the funeral and had Jigger! And not satisfied with that, they buzzed right along and had two more children! Girls! Did any of them get anything? They did not! Dear precious little Si got every damned cent!"

"Why didn't their parents take it to court and see that things were equitably adjusted?"

"They couldn't. And don't think they didn't try. It seems the old man didn't trust them and I don't blame him, after the way they did Jigger out of all that money. He appointed bank trustees and executors and told just how the funds should be doled out until Si was thirty-two. Then he was to get the whole caboodle. . . . Now listen, Donna, don't get the wrong idea. I've never met Si but he is no tightwad. When it was time for Jig and the girls to go to college, Si went to this financial setup and argued that it would be extremely undignified for a rich man to have an illiterate household and they let him finance all their education. And when he came into the money, he sent them each a check for ten thousand dollars. It was Si's ten thousand, that Jigger was cheated out of, that bought this house of ours. I don't want you to get the wrong impression. Si may be quite all right. After all, he didn't pick his own grandfather. But, oh, Donna, can't you see it's the chance of a lifetime for us?"

"Well, maybe. But I still do not see where I fit into the picture."

"I want you to help us show him a good time. To make him like us. To make him want us to go into business with him. That's all. I don't know any attractive girls that aren't married and honestly, Donna, when I heard about you and Mark—— Donna, I give you my word, I thought it was an answer to my prayers."

"Odd way to answer prayers," Donna commented dryly. "Odd way to pray, in the first place."

"Oh, I didn't pray that anything would happen between you and Mark. That never entered my head. I just prayed that God would cook up some scheme to ease me out of this ghastly jam. That's all. And you can see how it tied in. Right in the nick of time, too." She glanced at the clock, remembering the time. "I have to talk fast, Donna. I told Jigger if he brought the Jug home inside of two hours he had to bathe, feed him and put him to bed. He'll be back on the exact dot of two hours. Well, it's like this. Si arrives Tuesday afternoon, day before Christmas. That's all right. Christmas Eve they can trim the tree and fill the stockings.

Christmas Day will be all right. We'll have the tree and dinner and he can get acquainted with the Jug. I hope he likes children. But what can I do with him on Christmas night?"

"Put him to bed."

"Oh, no. We have to provide some amusement."

"I'm beginning to smell the proverbial rat. I am to be some amusement."

"That's right, darling. And we can sort of feel him out. He's seven years older than Jig and really we don't know a thing about him. We can fish around and find out whether he likes shows or bridge or skating or whether he's a stuffed shirt and wants to talk about art and literature."

"I see. I am the feeler-outer. But you may be all wet on this setup, Miriam. He's from California and they say out there they like their gals young and carefree, giddy and gauzy starlets. If he's like that, he'll be bored stiff with a solid old economic unit like me. Now some of this young set that have just staggered out of diapers are cute and good-looking as the dickens. He'd probably go for them like nobody's business."

"But suppose he doesn't! Suppose he's dignified and formal and stuffed shirt! What would he think of us, lining him up with gadflies? No, we have to sound him out first. And you are so safe, Donna."

"Hmm! Show me the woman who calls that a compliment!"

"It is a compliment! You can get along with anybody, Donna, and make them like it. No, for feeling out, you're just perfect. I still believe in answer to prayer, Donna. I'm sorry for Mark. I'd be a lot sorrier if it wasn't getting me out of such a hole! But you're just perfect for the part."

Donna agreed to rally round. She was rather pleased than otherwise. This interlude, sounding out Si Alison, should provide an amusing break in what promised to be an outstandingly harrowing holiday. She promised to be on hand for Christmas night. If, after first preliminaries, they found him to be not entirely allergic to

her general type, she would come up for a long week end and rally round with good will. If they found themselves gruesomely stuck with him on New Year's Eve, she would think of something. But, she warned her friend portentously, if they found that she didn't fit the role, it wouldn't hurt her feelings one iota.

Miriam literally fell on her neck.

"But see here, Mirry," Donna said, cleverly extricating herself from the embrace, "there are going to be some complications. Don't think there aren't. If he happens to be a stuffed shirt, what is he going to think of you, calling your only immediate child and heir, his nephew, by the quaint but informal cognomen of Jug?"

"I didn't do it," Miriam disclaimed hotly. "I think it's disgraceful. You started it yourself. Think back, my friend, and remember that the first time you came to call on us when we got home from the hospital, you shouted, 'Hi, Jigger, where's the little Jug?' And it has stuck to him like glue. I have an easy out on that one!"

"Have you? You mean you're going to tell the Moneybag I did it? That will get me off to a nice running start, won't it?"

"That's right. We can't tell him you did it. And we can't say Jigger did it. Can't we blame it on somebody that has moved away and Si can never possibly meet?"

"Sure. Oh, sure. But suppose he's the efficiency-expert type and goes around checking up. Then where will you and your business and settling affilliations wind up? Can't you tell him the stork had tattooed it on his little fat tummy before he got dumped off his little pink cloud?"

"Don't be silly, Donna. I'll think of something. Now that you've promised to stand by I'm not going to let a little squirt like the Jug get me down."

When Donna reached home she found her parents sitting alone by the fireplace. They were not reading. They were not playing games. They were not checking over last-minute shopping items nor enjoying another gay perusal of early Christmas cards. Only

the brightly blazing fire gave a semblance of cheer. So Donna launched into a long and rollicking recital of the woeful estate of the Alisons, Miriam, Jigger and the Jug, laying particular emphasis on the frightful hazards of subjecting innocent children to the vagaries of irresponsible grandparents. They chortled amusedly at the proper moments and clucked sympathetically at others. But at the conclusion, although she drew it out as long as she could, they relapsed again into quiet, smiling politely, but quiet. The Collwell household sitting in polite and smiling quiet two days before Christmas Eve!

Donna was no slacker. She served small glasses of sherry, raided the pantry for treasured cookies and settled herself determinedly on the pouf where she could prod the fire between sentences. She drew a deep breath and plunged into an account of the slick machinations of her fellow hall-bedroomers anent their annual yearly party. Having suffered by former experiences, before her day in their midst, this year they had evolved a system of blended social obligation and financial necessity that should make the World Bank blush for shame at its ineptness.

According to Donna and, allowing for slight exaggerations, Donna's word could be depended on. On their first Christmas in the pooled apartment each had gone along independently on her Christmas planning. Each had felt obligated to present each of her fellows with a slight remembrance. At that time, without consultation, each for herself had shrewdly figured out that, living together as they did, no favoritism must be shown. The result was that each of the six had been solemnly presented with five identical gifts of identical cost. There had been something strained and stilted about it, lacking personality, the personal touch, although none could take umbrage or feel slight. But some of the sets of five were more expensive than others, entailing slight embarrassment for some, slight superiority for others.

The second year they had held an official conference in honor of Christmas and agreed unanimously to limit expenditure for each

household gift to two dollars. This had obviated some difficulties but not all. Ten dollars for gifts to the fellow roomers, added to a dollar apiece for the postman, the maid and the janitor made Christmas a little more of a luxury than their modest budgets could balance. Especially when taken into consideration with the fact that all of the girls were already equipped with all the small nicieties that could be picked up for two dollars apiece. Just so much junk to lie around collecting dust for their own hands to eliminate, or to be passed on as bridge prizes or favors.

The third Christmas they agreed to eliminate all gifts and put the money into magazines for the apartment, which all could equally enjoy. But there was very little unanimity on favorite magazines and they were not in the apartment long enough to enjoy them anyhow.

On this, their fourth Christmas, Donna's first among them, they had held another conference. After long but not at all acrimonious discussion they had agreed to waive all Christmas gifts among themselves and put the money into a kitty to pay the expenses for their annual party, to which they were socially obligated anyhow. In essence, this was, virtually presenting the group with a sixty-dollar bonus.

As their enthusiasm waxed over the idea, they decided to make it an after-Christmas party, along in January, when they could borrow leftover Christmas decorations and favors from their families and friends, as well as conserving their own, thus washing out a very considerable item of party-giving expenditure.

Their acquisitive natures stirred by the possibilities of the project, they had gone farther. Each had agreed to save at least half of all edible gifts received, candies, nuts, preserves, fruit cakes and jellies and contribute them to the after-Christmas party refreshments, again cutting down delightfully on the general overhead. Her parents enthusiastically agreed that it was a thoroughly sound economic as well as social project.

"Are any of the girls going to be alone over Christmas, Donna?"

her mother asked. "There aren't going to be many of us here and we have plenty of room. I shouldn't like any of them being stuck alone in New York over Christmas. You can have as many of them up as you like. Dad's a good carver; he knows how to stretch a turkey."

"They are all going places, to relatives or friends. Except Sammy Ingram. She is going to have her Christmas with her red-headed boy friend, and she says, though I am not sure I believe her, that he is going to chef it himself. That I would like to see! From all I've seen of him, which isn't much, those hands of his are better adapted to the manly pastimes of lefts and rights to the jaw and socks in the kisser than the fine art of basting a turkey or setting fire to a plum pudding."

Christmas was very close.

6

REGARDLESS of personal disquietudes, Christmas came for the Collwells as inevitably as for the world at large and among them were no signs, visible or audible, of inner unease. To all appearances, it was another Christmas, like all Christmases past and all to come. Both Donna and her father waived their respective office parties to insure early departure from the city, early arrival at home. He picked her up in the car, both arms bulging with final packages, and the swift drive to New Jersey was enlivened with much cheerful chatter, much gay laughter.

There was the usual exclamatory arrival followed by hectic last-minute rushes, frenzied checking of lists for possible horrifying failures to remember someone, excited telephone calls, reminders, invitations. Mr. Collwell, not without pride, brought in the tree of his selection and solemnly turned it about for their praiseful inspection. A beautiful tree! Perfectly shaped! Just the right size!

No one said anything about it, but they were remembering other trees. Especially they remembered the year when David and Mark, growing up, beginning to feel the pressure of personal limited finances and deploring the high prices, argued effectively that paying for a tree was a sheer waste of money when the hills of New Jersey were chockablock with as good trees as God ever grew. Burning with economic zeal they had sallied forth and returned hours later, torn clothes wet through, chilled to the bone, exhausted and ravenous, triumphant bearers of an exquisite spruce. Mrs. Collwell complained only mildly that the damage to their

clothing, to say nothing of the quantities of food required to restore them to normal well-being, would have sufficed for the purchase of half a dozen trees. But she agreed, with loyal Christmas spirit, that no bought tree would have been so beautiful.

True, the boys had erred, as came to light a few days later. They had crossed the forest line onto a private estate and had painstakingly selected a perfect specimen of imported Norway spruce. By sad mischance a wandering caretaker, or low-lived poacher as the boys indignantly claimed, had seen and recognized them and shortly after Christmas Mr. Collwell received a formal statement of account from the owner of the estate, fifteen dollars due account one Norway spruce. Fifteen dollars for a Christmas tree.

There were no hard feelings about it. Mr. Collwell and his creditor agreed that Christmas spirit could quite easily dull young lads' perception of legal boundaries and settled amicably enough for ten dollars. Mr. Collwell shared the bill with the boys, two dollars apiece for them, six for him.

Ten Christmases ago that had been when Mark, to the Collwells, was still rated as David's pal, before a subtle almost imperceptible change in his status reclassified him as Donna's boy friend.

While Mr. Collwell tested out the electric wiring and bulbs Donna went to the basement for the bucket of earth, carefully treasured from year to year for just this purpose. She put the bucket in the sink and allowed water to seep into it gently until the dry soil was reduced to the proper state of mud and carefully cleansed the outside of the pail.

"Here's your mud!" she proclaimed laughingly.

Mrs. Collwell placed a stack of newspapers in the Christmas tree corner of the room and covered them with an old white sheet, mindful of possible spills and drippings during future waterings. Mr. Collwell inserted the tree firmly in the center of the soggy

mass and Donna and her mother steadied it while he wired it securely to the window jambs.

The bucket of mud reminded them of another Christmas, nine Christmases ago. Someone had told Mark, who passed the scientific tidbit along to the Collwells, that if a Christmas tree were set in a bucket of mud, and the mud kept thoroughly wetted every day, the tree would stay fresh and firm, without dropping its needles, right up to Twelfth Night.

"But who wants a bucket of mud under a Christmas tree?" Donna had protested indignantly.

"Oh, you cover it all around with cotton, rumpled up to look like snowdrifts," Mark expounded. "The bucket doesn't show."

They agreed to try it. The ground was hard-frozen but Donna with the flashlight, the boys with bucket, shovels and eventually with axes, repaired to the garden for a bit of God's good earth. This they had carefully preserved between Christmases ever since; the same bucket, the same potential mud, waiting in the basement for next Christmas.

Naturally they remembered it but naturally, this being a different Christmas, they did not as usual give voice to the memory. Every familiar act, almost every gesture, every old treasured trinket, reminded them of other times but this year no one said, "Do you remember this?" "Do you remember the time?" "Remember the year David and Mark—?" This was another, a different Christmas.

Mark Banister arrived a little after eight o'clock laden with gaily wrapped packages. He glanced amusedly around the room, noting that as usual all chairs, the divan, the tables and the piano top were already loaded with packages, tree trimmings, ribbons and wrappings, and with the confidence of long custom, carefully deposited his burdens on the floor under the divan beyond danger of being trampled on in the excitement of decoration.

He kissed Donna and her mother and hugged Mr. Collwell.

"I believe in you, Santy Claus," he piped in a boyish treble. "Don't forget me, Santy Claus! I know you got reindeer on the roof! I brung you a cooky, Santy!"

He too admired the tree. "You sure know how to pick 'em, Santy," he said approvingly and did not mention the trees of other years.

He got down on one knee and tested the moistness of the mud with an experimental finger.

"Um, not bad. But you'd better soak it again tomorrow. Well, begin throwing things at me. What goes on first?"

"The rain of course, stupid, and it takes forever. And I wish they'd stop calling it icicles. They called it rain when it was first invented and to me it's still rain. Just an old-fashioned little girl at heart, that's me! You take the top on that side, Mark, and I'll do the low side over here. Then we can switch."

Mr. Collwell, whose share of the trimming ended with the adjustment of the lights, shoved the packages off his favorite chair, filled his pipe and settled down to watch in comfort. Mrs. Collwell began filling the stocking for little Davie.

As Mark and Donna painstakingly strung up the strips of silver tinsel, he told them about the office party. Being a partner, he admitted, was not without its debit side. Unlike other years, when he had been a mere guest, this year he had been a host. This meant footing his share of the bills. It also meant that, as youngest and most virile of the hosts, he had been obliged to blend charm with dignity, see that nobody drank too much, nobody got fresh and there was no roughhouse.

"Instead of being a watchee as heretofore, this year you were a watcher," Donna remarked.

"And it isn't half as much fun," he said. "By the time it was over, my charm and dignity had worn so thin that the slickest pickpocket in the world couldn't have laid a finger on them."

He had other worries, too. He had not been at all sure just what was expected of him in his new capacity as a partner. Five

pounds of candy to his private secretary was easy enough. Tips to elevator boys and janitors and service men had been no problem. His seniors in the partnership had eased his uncertainties about minor employees by announcing that the company would as usual give candy, cigars and cigarettes, with a small bonus check, to each in the name of the firm of which he was now a part.

"Nothing very hard about it so far," Donna said. "Davie himself could have done it."

"I'm being stuck for a third of the cost, though. There's nothing easy about that. And how about my fellow partners? I've never been a partner before. There I was really stuck."

"What did you do?"

"I gave them each a bottle of Scotch. Good Scotch. The best I could get."

"That seems reasonable."

"I thought so, too. But when I got home I found they had ganged up and sent me a case of the same. Same brand. But maybe they've got a drag somewhere and got it wholesale. Mine was strictly retail."

"You'll probably be down in their books as a cheap skate forever after."

"No. The way I figure it, they are my papas in the company. Nobody expects small fry to do as much for papa as papa is honorbound to do for small fry. I figure I am absolutely in the clear. But I'm going to wear a T shirt and shorts when I go to work Thursday just to remind them that after all I am Junior."

There was no visible constraint, nothing to indicate that each was acutely conscious that this Christmas marked the end of an era, an era of Christmases and all the good days that had lain between. Next year, they would not have little Davie. Annette and Paul would want to begin building up the tradition of Christmas-at-home, as Alan and Jean had built it years ago when David was little, before Donna was born. Next year Mark would not be there, not even to help trim the tree. Donna might

invite someone else for the holidays, some stranger from New York. Donna's friends were always welcome but they were used to having Mark.

"Annette is coming early tomorrow, and little Davie, for his stocking and the tree," Mrs. Collwell said. "Mr.—Acheson, Paul Acheson is coming too. He is spending the holiday with them. Annette says she will probably marry him before long."

"Yes, I know." Mark did not look at her. "Paul told me. I've been seeing quite a lot of him in town. We grab a bite of lunch together whenever we can. I think he's all right, Mom. He happened to mention several people he knows, people he's done business with, too. Good guys. So I took a little time out and caught up with them and brought his name into the conversation. They speak very well of him. Extremely well. I think he's really O.K. I didn't mean to butt in, you understand, but it—well, it seemed a little thing I could do on the side. For Dave."

Mr. Collwell cleared his throat briskly. "He seems pretty much all right to me," he said.

"Yes, he is. I'm sure of it. You know something I like about him? It's a little thing but it shows—well, it shows something. I liked it. After I had been nosing around about him—well, it was yesterday. We had luncheon together. So I up and told him right out that I had been asking. I thought he might hear it from someone else and I wanted to be on the up-and-up with him. So I told him."

"How did he take it, Mark?"

"He took it swell. He grinned and said, 'What do you think I mentioned all those names for? That's what I wanted you to do.' I thought that was pretty darn decent of him. He could have resented it, from an outsider like me. He knows how we all feel about Annette and Davie."

"It was very decent of him," Mrs. Collwell said huskily.

"You're the only one who could have done that, Mark," Mr.

Collwell said. "I couldn't. I'm Annette's father-in-law and it would have looked as if I were trying to run her life for her and handle her private affairs."

"That's the way I looked at it," Mark agreed. "Besides, if he turned out to be the kind to get sore and beef about it, better take it out on me than on Davie's granddad." He jerked his head toward the divan beneath which his Christmas packages lay safely. "I brought him a bottle of the Scotch the bosses gave me. I mean my podners. Just to show I feel friendly toward him and am willing to count him into the gang."

They did not say anything to that. They took it for what it was, another tribute to his friendship for David, Davie's father.

"Are you so tied up with your fellow podners and their bow-legged brats that you can't accept an invitation to a party next year?" Donna asked. "Or should I wait until you have a chance to gaze into the squint-eyes tomorrow?"

"I have a few open dates on my calendar next year," he said cautiously. "I have to be picky and choosey though. Only three hundred and sixty-five left. The rest are all tied up."

"That's good. We'll be expecting you."

"Could I have the low-down on the who, where, when, why and what of this social event?"

"We are the who. I and the fellow hall-bedroomers. The why is to thank those who have invited us places and to remind those who haven't that they are now in our social debt. The where is our exclusive and refined boardinghouse. The when is the third Saturday night in January. The what is a post-Christmas party."

"What in the name of heaven is a post-Christmas party?"

"You needn't swear about it. It's simply after-Christmas. Don't you know what post means? We're doing it for economic reasons. We're going to use leftover Christmas trims for *décor* and serve leftover candies and foods for refreshments. If your podner and the snub nose have anything left over tomorrow, just take it all

away in a spare pocket and pass it along to me. You'll meet it again at the party. You'll receive a formal, hand-painted invitation later on but I wanted to be sure you would come before I wasted a three-cent stamp on you. We are obligated to furnish stamps for all our personal invitations. It's a date then."

By eleven o'clock the tree was trimmed and enthusiastically pronounced the loveliest tree they had ever had. They tuned in Christmas carols on the radio and sang or hummed along with them. Mrs. Collwell served eggnog and fruitcake. At midnight they stood up, the four of them, holding hands, and said Merry Christmas and kissed one another.

When Mark was at the door, ready for departure, Donna said, "And don't forget if there's anything there you can't use, save it for me for the post party. Oh, yes, I nearly forgot; I hope she talks through her nose."

Mark laughed. "No, as I recall, she is a particularly warm-throated contralto."

"Ah ha! I see it all! The masculine type! Dictatorial, bossy, managerial. Just the kind of daughter a senior podner would have himself. It serves you right!"

On other Christmases the household had been awakened by scuffling rushes and gay shouts from Donna, David and Mark, each trying to be first with his Christmas greetings. On this Christmas, lying awake, silent and motionless, they were stirred to action by persistent ringing of the telephone and when they stumbled along, the three of them, in slippers and robes, to silence its clamor, the greeting was a shrill cry of excitement.

"C'ismas gif', you solks! C'ismas gif', Gra'ma! C'ismas gif', Grampa! C'ismas gif', Aun' Donna!"

Confusion and excitement immediately prevailed. Telephone messages; arrival of special deliveries and telegrams; packages left at the door. The breathless arrival of Aunt Maudie, too early, determined not to miss anything. Friends and neighbors dropping by.

Annette came with her mother and little Davie—and Paul Acheson.

When all the women trailed chattily upstairs, ostensibly to remove Davie's snowsuit and boots, Mr. Collwell waved Paul Acheson to a chair and gestured to the cigarettes and the pitcher of eggnog.

"Stop me if I get off on the wrong foot," he said pleasantly. "I've never been a stepfather-in-law before and I'm not quite wise to the technique. Your name is Paul, isn't it? Mind if I use it?"

"I wish you would, sir."

"O.K. And you may as well call me Dad or Pop as the other kids do."

Paul Acheson glanced at the open doorway where the rise of the staircase showed. Mr. Collwell correctly interpreted the glance.

"She'll like it." He answered the glance in a quiet voice. "Mother Collwell or Mom. Annette usually says Mother Collwell but either one is all right. She likes both."

"Thank you very much, sir. You're making things very easy. He said you would be like that—Mark Banister, I mean."

"Yes, we're like that. Mark ought to know."

"We aren't going to be married for a while yet," Paul said. "Before we are married there are a few things I'd like to talk over with you, if you don't mind. I have some ideas but I'd like to ask your advice."

"I'm afraid I'm not well qualified as an adviser, Paul, but right or wrong I will not hesitate to say what I think. Jean and I both think you're absolutely sound on the matter of adoption and Davie's name."

"Yes. Annette told me. It's a little tough on Annette. And on—her, too." His glance toward the stairway was explanatory.

"On her. Yes. But she'll weather it. You'll find her a very good weatherer. Especially in a pinch."

The day went off like an ordinary Christmas but it was not ordinary. When Mrs. Collwell took Davie up to the lavatory to

scrub his hands of the remains of a melted chocolate Santa Claus, strive as she would and did for discretion, she could not silence a tentative comment.

"Mr. Acheson is very nice, isn't he, Davie? Do you like him very much?"

Davie regarded her solemnly. "He's going to be my new daddy," he announced with bland formality.

"Yes, I know. I think that's very nice."

"My other daddy isn't coming home any more."

"No. He isn't coming home."

Davie felt that further elucidation was required. "All little kids has got to have a daddy," he told her kindly.

Mrs. Collwell hugged him against her, so that her eyes were hidden. "Yes, darling. You're right. Kids have got to have daddies. Mommies need them, too. . . . Hold your fingers apart, honey! Dear me, that must have been a big Santa Claus! Just look! Part of him has run clear up on your nice clean cuffs."

When all the guests had gone, Christmas night settled in with dull quietude. Jean and Alan Collwell admitted to some weariness, a pleasant weariness, but they were tired. It had been a grand day, just grand. Everything had gone off perfectly. The dinner, delicious; the gifts, exquisite; the guests, delightful; the tree, the handsomest they had ever had. Still, they were a little tired. It couldn't be, could it, that they were getting along toward the oldish side of life?

They professed genuine pity for poor Donna, who had to hurry along to more excitement, confusion and gaiety. They thanked heaven they had reached the state of life when they could settle down and relax if they wanted to. And they wanted to.

Donna, for the first time, was secretly delighted that she had so loyally promised to rally to the amusement of Si Alison. Miriam, by letter, had relieved some of her doubt about their plan for his social regalement. Miriam had written to correct any possible wrong impression she might have given about Jigger's brother.

According to Jigger, Si was one swell guy and not at all piggish with the money he had inherited. So, Miriam assured her, he couldn't be such a bad egg after all and they might have quite a nice time with him. But she did hope he would take Jigger into business with him, whatever business he went into. It would be lovely, she wrote, to have both ends meet—for the first time—when we have the new baby.

Her pen seemed to bear down more heavily on the final brief paragraph and Donna interpreted it as an instinctive gesture of emphasis, though nothing was underscored.

"And we're not putting anything over on Mark, either. Jigger told him you had promised to stand by in our crisis and Mark didn't object at all. He said you always were a swell sport in crises. It must have been answer to prayer, Donna. We'd never have dared ask you to do such a thing if you hadn't broken with Mark."

Donna amused her parents by exaggerated puzzlement over how suitably to garb herself for this tentative approach, having, as she said, no slight notion whether his taste ran to slick chicks, sophisticates or intellectuals. They laughed at her suggestion of a compromise, a delicate blending of the three. Say blue bobby sox, exotic make-up and horn-rimmed spectacles, playing up the three obvious extremes. They acquiesced eventually that it was the part of wisdom to tackle him dead cold, absolutely in the natural Donna, and then, if he did not take to her normal type, she could pretend that it was merely an assumption designed to impress him and that she was quite a different girl at heart.

In the end it was very easy. Miriam rushed her upstairs to remove her wraps, hugged her dishevelingly and whispered ecstatically, "Donna, he's wonderful! He's marvelous! He's as nice as Jigger. The Jug is crazy about him."

"Does he like the Jug?"

"He seems to. He hauled him on the sled and made him a snow man. And he brought us the loveliest presents!"

"Has he said anything about the business?"

"Oh, no! Not yet!" Miriam was plainly shocked. "It's all good clean Christmas fun so far. But that's what he came for! I don't know why he doesn't just set himself up in charge of one of the businesses he's already got, with Jigger as his assistant, but, no, he wants to start something on his own. And Donna?" She spoke hesitantly. "If you aren't going to—well, take a fancy to him, don't lead him on. Not too much anyhow. Don't do to him what you did to Mark. That would turn him against us because you are our friend."

"Now just what is it you want, Mirry? Shall I be nice to him or not?"

"Oh, be nice to him. Very nice. But not too nice. Don't make him fall in love with you if you aren't going to love him."

"I see. I am not to let him fall in love with me until Jigger gets him tied up to an ironclad contract."

"Oh, you make it sound so mercenary, Donna. I don't mean that at all. I just mean—well, be careful. That's all. Be awfully nice to him. But be careful."

Donna found it easy to be nice to him. He was more than willing to be pleased.

At first sight, his large face with broad, good-natured features under a tousled shock of dark hair seemed illy fitted to his long, loose-jointed body. Donna gazed at him in frank fascination. This was Jigger Alison's brother. Jigger had not been born into their select little coterie. Miriam had met him—the others never knew the exact details of the meeting—when he was struggling with his first job after college. She had been his introduction but from the first he had fitted, fitted to the queen's own taste. Jigger was so handsome that he had immediately been dubbed their Arrow Collar ad.

"I must say you brothers do not look much alike," she commented.

Si Alison beamed happily. "I see what you mean," he assented.

"You're right. Jig got all the looks in the family." Then he added gleefully, "But I got all the dough! I'll bet Jig wouldn't mind swapping."

"You're darn right I wouldn't mind," Jigger said heartily.

Under adroit questioning, it appeared that Si Alison liked everything: bridge, poker, gin rummy; music, theater, dancing; sports, indoor and out, summer and winter; crowds, foursomes and twosomes. They set up the table for bridge but the playing was desultory, yielding honors to conversation. Si had recently visited their married sisters and their families and was constantly remembering minor incidents worthy of recounting.

"The girls sure got themselves queer ducks for husbands, Jig," he remarked. "They don't take after the Alisons. But they seem to suit the girls all right so it's none of our nevah min'. It still gives me a jolt, Jig, to remind myself that you are an old married man and a proud papa. I didn't think anything of it when the girls got tied up. You expect it of girls. That's what they're for."

"Speak for your sisters, Mr. Alison. Or haven't you heard that there are variations on the female theme?"

"They are not noticeable, except in face and figure," he said. "When a guy gets married, you always wonder why. When a femme doesn't, you just wonder why not?"

"Start wondering about me then," she said. "I should whet your interest. I am a why-notter."

"You're young yet," he said deprecatingly.

As her interest grew, her confidence rallied. "What do you think of these two calling your only nephew by the name of Jug?" she asked slyly, ignoring Miriam's startled glance.

"I like it. I couldn't beef even if I didn't. I was the one who christened little brother here by the name of Jigger." He laughed reminiscently. "Did you ever hear Jig's baptismal name?"

"No. I thought maybe his mother was frightened by a tap dancer."

"No. After the Old Man went to heaven and left me what he

couldn't take with him—and it was in hope of that she called me Silas in the first place—she was so fed up with everything about him and me that she swung 'way over to the other side of the pendulum and called the next brat Percy! Pure spite on her part. I had to lug him off for his first day at school and before the day was over I had to wallop the daylights out of three frolicsome pests who wanted to make something of it. I told them his name wasn't Percy at all. That was just his school name, stuck on to please the teachers who like sissy stuff like that. They asked what his real name was and on the spur of the moment the only thing I could think of was Jigger. Maybe a California chigger nipped me at the moment. Anyhow I said his name was Jigger and, if I ever heard him called anything else outside of classes, I'd wallop them for more daylights."

"Did you ever hear it again?"

"No. And before he hit high school he was Jigger on his report cards, too."

Donna decided that this great kindness she had bravely promised her friend was going to pan out something of an amusing boon. Later in the evening, when, without much effort they had attained the Si and Donna stage, she said, "Did you know, Si, that I was invited here tonight in the capacity of a guinea pig? They are trying me out on you to get your reaction and see what you are allergic to. They picked on me because I am so neutral, not to say mongrel. I never strike people dead in their tracks, but nobody ever starts right off taking punches at me either. So figuring backward and forward from me, we can pick out just the girl for you. What type of girl do you like?"

"Girls," he said generously.

"What kind? There are girls and girls. And more girls. Also women."

"It's all one sex, isn't it? I like it."

He wasn't going to be difficult, hanging around for a week or ten days. The business venture was almost in the bag right now.

They discussed future meetings. Donna had to go back to work next morning but would be home on Friday night. Friday night was a date then. Si took her office number. He had to look up a few people in New York and he would give her a ring. Luncheon, maybe, or a show. And couldn't they all have dinner in town some night, and the theater afterward? Miriam looked bothered.

"You three go," she urged. "You don't know what a chore it is, getting baby sitters for so long and getting the Jug turned over to them. I feel uneasy if I am away too long. And it takes forever getting back out here after a show."

They decided to skip the theater. Theaters were with them always.

"We must do something on New Year's Eve, though," Miriam said. "I'll get someone that night if I have to cable some savage country and buy myself a slave."

"You'd better check with Si privately on his type," Donna advised. "After all, he can't very well say he isn't satisfied, with me sitting here glaring at him."

"Am I boring you?" he asked solicitously.

"No." She smiled and the little golden hearts flickered in her eyes. "You interest me inexpressibly."

"Then let's save time and call the type settled," he said with finality.

They realized it was too late to get reservations for anything worth while in New York for New Year's Eve. Donna said she knew several people who were giving general open-house parties and she could take them all right along—that kind of friends, she explained, that kind of parties.

"But they're strangers to us," Miriam protested. "I could give a party here. Not a very big one. Lots of our crowd are tied up. You remember their arguments against New Year's Eve, Donna. But we could get together a crowd of some kind and do the best we can."

"Why get a crowd?" Si asked. "There are four of us now."

"I'll tell you!" Donna said triumphantly. "Let's make it a rough-and-tumble at the Lakeside. We can go coasting. The kids will have the trails well broken for us. We can get it warmed up and cook our own suppers and bartend our own drinks. We'll notify the bunch and anyone can come who likes, with the understanding that they are not invited and have to look out for themselves. It won't be dressy-up but it might be fun. We've never done that before on New Year's Eve."

"Sounds swell," Si said heartily. "Sounds perfect. But if you just thought it up to keep from hurting my feelings in case I have no formal clothes, I would inform that we wear them in California too. I have them and brought them."

"Good! Why don't you wear them? I've never seen white tie and tails on a toboggan. I shall stick to ski pants. I am sure Annette and Paul Acheson will come and probably a few of the maternity set can break away for an hour or two. And maybe Mark——"

"Mark's going to Washington," Jigger said. "He phoned this morning."

"Is he taking the bowlegged boss's daughter with him?" Donna asked flippantly.

"How do you know his boss has bowlegs?"

"He hasn't got a boss any more. He's a podner."

When Miriam went upstairs with Donna to get her wraps, she embraced her again.

"Darling, you're wonderful! He isn't at all bad, is he? And you can see you are just the type for him. But be careful, Donna. Don't lead him on. Stay just the way you are. It's perfect, just like this."

"I suppose he is going to New York to investigate businesses," Donna said. "He's not at all hard to have around. I hope he does settle here. The contract is virtually signed and the ink is dry."

"Donna—" Miriam spoke slowly—"weren't you ever in love with Mark?"

Donna laughed. "Of course I was. I still am. I daresay I'll always be a little in love with Mark."

"But I thought——"

"And you thought right, my child. No engagement. No marriage. But there's no law against being in love, is there?"

"Oh," Miriam said flatly.

Donna still smiled. Thank heaven, she thought behind her smile, nobody in New York, at the office or at the apartment, knows me well enough to ask questions! And nobody ever will! And I'm going to stay there much more of the time from now on.

She did not sit at her window that night, thinking. There was nothing to think. Christmas and a pleasant long era were over.

7

DONNA saw a good deal of Si Alison in the days that followed and found them pleasant, stimulating days. Almost from the first he was talking business, serious business with his brother, ample and gratifying proof of her success as an amuser. He had investigated, and continued to investigate, many avenues of investment for his money and his talents but in the end he frowned on them all with discontentment.

"There's nothing in it but making money" was his invariable verdict.

When Donna wondered mildly why he did not take charge of one of the businesses he already had his hands on, he said firmly, "Nix on that. I don't want to go through life wearing the Old Man's mittens. I'm a big boy now. I want gloves of my own."

His explorations took him to Boston for three days but his return showed him still unsatisfied. "It's a sound proposition," he explained, "and a thoroughly sound investment. But gosh! All they do is make shoes! Who wants to go through life making shoes?"

"Everybody goes through life buying them" was Donna's comment.

"Aw, let 'em go barefoot. Do 'em good. That's one of the silliest foibles of civilization. You can't get the feel of the earth through cowhide."

"It doesn't seem to bother the cows."

"Maybe not. But who wants to be a cow?"

On the last evening of his visit he suddenly flung his bridge hand face down on the table. The others, sensing important talk, followed his example.

"I've been digging into businesses, Jig, all kinds of businesses, for over a year and none of 'em really clicks with my insides. None of 'em seems big enough."

"Maybe you've been looking at them through the wrong end of a telescope," Donna remarked. "There are plenty of big businesses afoot. And getting bigger by the minute."

"I didn't mean 'big' in the sense of size. Or the sense of making money either. I mean 'big' in the sense of being important. What do you think is the most important thing in the world?" On the question his drawling voice turned suddenly brisk.

"Babies," Miriam said promptly. "Children."

"Yes, I guess maybe you're right on that. Meaning your babies and all the other mothers' babies all over the world. Yes, I guess so. But we can't very well make a business of baby production." He glanced at his brother. "What do you say, Jig? The most important thing?"

"Money," Jigger said grimly, remembering budgets and bills.

"Yeh, if you figure money as a means to the kids' clothes and food and doctor bills. Yes, money ties in all right."

They looked expectantly at Donna. Her eyes were wide and black, showing no gold.

"Nothing is important," she said coldly. "Not really." When her words were received in silence except for Miriam's faint gasp of amazement she hurried on. "The things we think are important today are the trivia of tomorrow. Today we live, tomorrow we die. What becomes of all our tremendous importance then? Faded away like will o' the wisps. We think things are important for a little while. And then, very soon, almost immediately, they aren't a bit important."

"She's ignorant," Si said leniently. "She hasn't done any living yet. She'll learn."

"What do you think is the most important, Si?" Miriam asked breathlessly.

"Bread," he said quietly.

"You mean, ordinary bread?"

"Planning to open up a bakery?" Donna queried.

"Oh, no. My plan is deeper than that. I dig right down to the land that receives the seed that grows the grain that grinds the flour that makes the bread."

"That lay in the business that Si built." Donna was still flippant.

"I can't wean myself away from the notion of ranching," Si went on. "It's the biggest business there is. The world has got to be fed. And me, I'd a damn sight rather help feed it than manufacture its lipsticks, its gunpowder and its shiny tin jeeps. Just as much money in it, too," he added hastily. "And more fun."

"Do you mean you've had your heart set on California citrus all this time?" Donna asked indignantly.

"Oh, no. Nothing like that. Right now orange juice is the heavenly essence prescribed by all the medicos. Tomorrow it will be passé. Tomorrow somebody will prove that a delicate extraction of ragweed has twenty-seven and two-thirds percent more of what health requires than all the citrus fruits in creation. I'm one jump ahead of them. I want to begin raising ragweed to sell them as soon as they get it discovered."

"California will not thank you for leveling its orchards in favor of ragweed."

"Who said anything about California? California is passé, too. It's already gone to seed. It's bogged itself deeper into its little old rut than all New England put together. I want to go some place that hasn't had time to dig itself a rut yet. I want to be in on the ground floor to help dig in. The Dakotas, Idaho, Montana; some place like that. All these other businesses I've looked into make me sick at the stomach. Nope! We've got to work it out on

those lines, Jig. A ranch, a big ranch. The biggest ranch in the world."

"You can't drag Miriam and the Jug off to wild places like those," Donna protested. "What could Mirry do on a thousand acres of wheat?"

"She could keep house for her husband, couldn't she? She could take care of the Jug. That's all she does here."

"Don't think about me." Miriam was pale but firm. "Whatever you boys decide will suit me just fine."

"Miriam! You're crazy! You couldn't go off and live in places like those he has in mind. Your relatives are here. Your friends are here. This is your home."

"Yes," Miriam assented. "But Jig's my only husband."

"You mean if these idiots decide to go ahead and make fools of themselves you'll go right along and help them do it?"

Miriam laughed. "Sure. I'll let them make a fool of me, too. I think I'm going to enjoy it."

"That's what marriage does to you," Donna commented dryly.

On elaboration, they learned that Si Alison's idea of wheat ranching was not on a modest homesteading scale. He wanted hundreds of thousands of acres, half a state, if he could get hold of it. And loneliness was entirely outside his reckoning. He wanted thousands of other enthusiasts to join the venture and go along with them, preferably young GI's, married and with children.

When Jig wondered uneasily if many of the right sort could be weaned away from the luxuries of urban life, Si laughed at him.

"Who's going to do any weaning? We're going to take our luxuries along with us. Installing luxuries will be our first job. We're going to build ourselves a town. I'll probably wind up being mayor and get myself into politics. We're not going to house our—our allies—in tumble down shacks two or three miles apart. We're going to live in towns and commute to our ranches in jeeps. We're

going to have electrification and plumbing and central heating. We're going to have movies and dance halls and PTA's and Women Voters and all that baloney to keep our femmes happy, nosing around in other people's business like they do here."

"What do you city slickers know about farm life?" Donna asked scornfully.

"Nothing. We're going to have farmers run that end of it and teach the rest of us how. Jig knows about business—he'll have to tackle the financial angle. I know about surveying and engineering, that'll be my chore. I wish we could talk Mark Banister into going in with us. He'd be perfect for the personnel slant. That's the really vital angle, the personnel."

"Mark Banister! I hope you don't think Mark Banister is fool enough to throw away a good thing like he has here!"

"Oh, I don't know. He might. This is going to be a good thing, too. Damn good. We'll go to work on him, Jig. Build it up by easy stages. He'd be perfect for personnel."

"I won't have much money to put in, Si," Jig said. "I'll sell the house here, no trouble about that. But that's the best I can do."

"Who asked you for any money? We've got the Old Man's money, haven't we? And we'll sell out a lot of that small stuff he has scattered around all over the West. Right now's the time to sell, too. We'll have a couple of million to start with, maybe more. We'd better hang onto the oil, for a while anyway. To make sure of a steady income as we go along. And we'll set up a trust fund for the Jug so if we go stony he can still have his Grade A and a slate and pencils when he starts to school. And," he added, smiling sagely, "we will remember there is an off-chance there may be more grandbrats in the future."

"May I come out some time and watch Mirry milk a cow and throw slop to the swine?" asked Donna.

"Sure. We're going to have our own airport. Nonstop flights between us and New York. Hop out for cocktails any afternoon you find time."

"Statistics show," Donna said warningly, "that more farm women go mentally haywire than in any other walk of life."

"We must remind personnel to get hold of a good psychiatrist," Si told his brother. "We can't have our women going haywire on us. We'll need our wire for real hay."

Si was obviously in dead earnest about it. He admitted he had two or three sites under serious consideration and would decide among them immediately. By early spring things should be well under way.

"It'll take a full year to dig ourselves in and map out our plan of operation. Anything in our territory that's already in cultivation we'll keep going but we won't be in a rush about the rest. Laying out tracts and surveying, installing power and water will take a lot of time. But in ten years anyhow we ought to have a setup that will make the neighbors sit up and take notice."

"By neighbors I suppose you mean Mexico and Canada," Donna said sarcastically.

Si grinned at her. "I was dickering about a grand tract in Canada," he said. "I gave that up on account of the kids. Most parents still want to keep their children Yanks. And there won't be any trouble about the money angle while we're getting started, Jig. What we've got is security for plenty more."

"If you don't expect to make money for ten years," Donna said, "how do you expect these hypothetical allied ranchers of yours to support said wives and children in the meantime?"

"Lend-lease," Si said with a magniloquent gesture. "That's why personnel is so important. They've got to be hand-picked. We'll have a few flops of course but we don't want any more than are absolutely unavoidable from a statistical viewpoint. Get to work on Banister right away, Jig. You'll like ranching, Miriam. You'll have a little trouble with the radio just at first, because the stations will have unfamiliar names. But you'll get onto it. Are you in, Jig?"

"You're darn tootin we're in! Aren't we, Miriam?"

"You're darn tootin'!" was her quick corroboration. "Suppose we can afford a pony for the Jug?"

"Sister, we can afford him a flying horse if he wants one!"

After the night of their first meeting, Si had used his brother's car to call for Donna and to drive her home at the end of the evening. On this night, he parked the car in the driveway, where Mark had always parked, and put his arm around her. Donna snuggled her head against his shoulder and her cheek touched his. Si kissed her.

"Go ahead and cry a little if you want to," he said kindly. "All my coats are specially treated for tearstains."

"Why should I cry?" she asked. "I do not want to cry. I'm having a grand time. Why should I cry?"

"Because you're stuck here with me instead of the guy you'd like to be sitting with. A very tear-jerking situation."

"If I wanted to be sitting with somebody else, I could be." She spoke mildly and without defiance.

"If you are determined to save face you can't be sitting with somebody else," he said. "And you are determined to save face!"

"Do you mind kissing me instead of talking so much?" she asked lightly. "It's much more entertaining."

Si kissed her. Then he laughed.

"I'm sorry you don't enjoy it, Donna. I do. Very much."

"So do I enjoy it! I love having you kiss me."

"Your pretty red lips are lying," he said good-naturedly. "But I do not blame them. It isn't their fault. Your distorted little mind told them to say that."

"Why do you think I do not—enjoy kissing you?" she asked curiously.

"Because your lips always try to get away." He was still laughing. "Your mind, and a very stubborn mind it is, won't let them. Your heart is better educated than your mind but your mind is the boss. It controls your nerves and muscles. So it tells your lips to kiss me and tells your heart to shut up, that one man's kiss is

as good as another. Your heart knows better but it can't talk back to your mind."

"What a lot you know about anatomy!"

"I know a lot about everything. I know you are being a very silly little girl. Listen, Donna. I am an old, wise, experience-hardened gentleman. Let me give you a few pointers. What do you expect of a guy anyhow? Perfection? You won't get it. He won't get it from you, either. Suppose he did let you down about something or other a time or two? If he——"

"He didn't. Mark never let me down in his life." She caught her breath sharply. "You—you already know it is Mark, don't you?"

"Sure. I knew that the first night I met you."

"The first night! How could you possibly know?"

"I knew it the first time you mentioned his name. Because you do not say his name like all the other words in your vocabulary. And also because, when you said it, the light in your eyes went black."

Donna resolved to avoid the name in future.

"It has nothing to do with Mark," she assured him. "Absolutely nothing. There never lived a grander guy than Mark."

"What is it then, Donna? You can confide in me. I've been father confessor to much wickeder women than you."

"You won't understand," she said slowly. "It's not Mark. It's marriage. I know all about marriage and I don't like it. I don't want any part of it!"

He drew her about in his arms so he could look into her face. "Why not?" he asked interestedly. "Too cowardly? Too selfish? Or just too lazy?"

"Let me think it over," she said.

He waited patiently, holding her.

"I think it isn't any of those things," she said at last. "I'm sure it isn't. I'm certainly not afraid of being married. Not a bit! And I am sure my worst enemies would not call me selfish. And

heaven knows I am not lazy! I think maybe it is that I am—well, too proud, if you know what I mean."

"Too proud!"

"Yes. Too proud to let myself be hurt. There's too much hurt in marriage."

"You're going to be hurt anyhow, darling," he argued quickly. "You're being hurt now and you're going to be hurt worse. You're like those—what do you call 'em?—flagellists, lacerating their own flesh hoping it will absolve them from harder beatings later on. It doesn't work, angel. And after all, why shouldn't you stand a little hurting? Everybody gets hurt. You'll be hurt, too. Inside marriage, or outside looking in, you're going to get hurt. But somehow in marriage the hurts seem more worth while."

"Perhaps hurt was not just the right word. I should have said humiliation. I am too proud to be humiliated."

"Humiliated! Lord, Donna, mothers are the most honored humans on earth."

"By everybody but their husbands perhaps," she said bitterly.

"Oh, I see." He lighted a cigarette for her, and one for himself, and considered it thoughtfully. "Oh, that!" There was something close to contempt in his voice. "I guess I see what you mean. I'm disappointed in you, Donna."

"What do you think I mean?" she demanded.

"You want to stay up on your nice bright pedestal, the pedestal every man builds in his heart for the girl he loves. You want to stay up there and be admired and pampered and catered to without ever stepping down to the familiarities, the intimacies of married life; you want to avoid the petty bickering, the little annoyances, the everyday wear-and-tear humdrum of domesticity. I really am disappointed in you, Donna."

"Oh, we're not talking about the same thing at all. I knew you wouldn't understand. Let's skip it, shall we?"

"Sure, let's skip it." He kissed her suddenly and laughed. "I caught you unaware that time. Your mind hadn't time to tele-

graph your lips to meet me halfway. They very nearly escaped."

"It wasn't much good, was it?" she asked shamefacedly.

"No good at all. But it's no good the other way, either."

"Si, maybe you won't believe this but I—I like you tremendously much. I like everything about you. And I'm not a bit afraid of—just being married, you know. The act of being married. I'm tempted to try to seduce you, just to prove it."

"Suits me, Donna. Suits me fine. Just send me a wire as soon as your mind gets the rest of your anatomy convinced that one guy is as good as another and I'll catch the first plane back. But it may take longer than you think. Hearts can be pretty stubborn, too."

8

MARK had accepted Donna's invitation to the post-Christmas party with amusement and with alacrity. Frank curiosity whetted his eagerness. His nearest approach to her New York residence had been the pleasant reception room on the ground floor. He had never met the girls to whom Donna gaily referred as her fellow hall-bedroomers.

He pressed the button marked 6B and a clicking latch gave him admission. He noticed the gaudy Christmas wreath that decorated the ceiling of the elevator and smiled, regretting his aloneness, at the conspicuous spray of mistletoe woven into the holly. He arrived late by planned design to avoid awkward early moments and the pleasant blending of music and laughter and merry voices as he approached 6B was assurance that his effort had been successful.

Donna, waiting for him in the open doorway, greeted him warmly.

"Merry after-Christmas, Mark!"

"Happy next New Year!" he replied.

She pointed a firm forefinger to the chandelier over her head. "You have to kiss me!" she said. "More mistletoe. A prime after-Christmas requisite."

Mark kissed her.

"Are you officiating as doorman and butler?" he asked.

"Oh, no. Anybody near the buzzer answers it. But you are the only one who had not arrived so I knew it had to be you and I was waiting for you. Down this way, Mark."

She led the way down the wide hall and waved hospitably to an open door on the right side.

"Gentleman's room," she said. "I have to stay and keep hold of you until you sign the guest register. Each of us is responsible for her own guests in the book. You needn't primp anyhow. You look all right. These are the girls' rooms along the hall. We left them all open tonight to take care of the overflows."

"Which is yours?" he asked, glancing interestedly into the pleasant rooms on either side.

"None of them. Mine is not on inspection. I have the maid's room off the kitchen and we stacked all the extra furniture and breakables in there. It's jammed to the keyhole. I have to sleep on the sofa tonight. Here is the guest book. Sit here. Look, Mark! You aren't onto the system so I'll give you a tip in advance. They really pull a nasty with this guest book. They do it every year. Everybody has to sign in on the left-hand page. You notice the right-hand pages are vacant. That is because everybody has to sign out, too, on the line opposite his arriving signature. The departing signature is a good index to their liquor consumption and by that the girls figure whether they can afford to invite said consumer next year."

She turned the pages back to records of former parties. "See what I mean? Some of those names you can't even read."

Mark glanced at the pages amusedly. "Gosh! The first signer-in last year must be here yet. He never did check out."

"That's Joey. Somebody took him home. He couldn't tell a pen from a cigarette, the shape he was in. In fact one year he did try to sign out with a cigarette and nearly burned up the book. There's my name. You can see how cold-sober I was. The girls say that was one reason they decided to let me move in, I wouldn't be mooching other people's hooch. Now you sign here, Mark, and tomorrow I'll have a file index of your liquid refreshment."

Mark dutifully signed.

"We do not try to introduce everybody to everybody else," she

explained. "We couldn't if we wanted to. We really do not know one another's friends very well and can't remember the names. If you get next to someone you haven't met, just say, 'I'm Mark Banister. Isn't this a slick party?' and go on from there. They all understand the system. We'll go to the dining room first. Right now the dining room is the bar but at midnight it will be the supper salon."

The dining room was appropriately decorated with small trees, holiday sprays and wreaths and the table was laid out with trays of hors d'oeuvres, canapes, candies and nuts. There was a large punch bowl at each end of the table and a uniformed maid, assisted by a houseman, was replacing glasses and trays and adding ice and other ingredients.

Donna introduced Mark to those standing near and then called out brightly, "Listen, everybody. This is Mark Banister. If you happen to stumble into him anywhere just tell him who you are. He doesn't bite." She raised her glass. "Merry after-Christmas, everybody!"

"Merry after-Christmas to you!"

"Merry a whole year of it!"

Twice Donna stopped passing girls for special introductions. "She's part of the house" was her brief explanation of the singling out.

Mark's feeling was one of complete and fascinating strangeness. It was a nice crowd, good-looking, well dressed. The rooms did not appear crowded. In the living room several couples were dancing. Someone was playing the piano and a tall girl with an accordion was seated atop it, extemporizing accompaniments. Occasionally she launched off into a rag arrangement of a familiar Christmas carol and the dancing was halted by laughter and applause.

Mark had been with Donna among strangers many times, in dance halls, restaurants, theater lobbies. Always on those occasions he had felt a sense of warm intimacy, he and Donna, the two

of them, alone together among outsiders. Now he felt aloof and alone. He, though Donna was beside him, was a solitary stranger. This was Donna's chosen home. These were her friends. Was it for this, for these people, that she had so effectively withdrawn herself from him, from her home, from the friends of her childhood? Quite definitely she was at home, an integral part of her surroundings and of the gathered group.

As they stood in a corner of the arched alcove, chatting together and with others near them, a man touched Donna's shoulder. "Dance, gorgeous?" he asked.

"Love to. 'Scuse please, Mark."

Mark soberly watched her drifting away from him. The man who had taken her, he observed, was older than the other guests; not old, but older.

"Mr. Banister—" a throaty low voice broke into his reflections—"come quick. The love seat has just been vacated. If we hurry we can grab it and get a bird's-eye view of things at ease."

With a light finger on his arm she led him deftly through the dancers to a far corner and sighed comfortably as they dropped together to the low couch.

"You didn't get my name, I suppose," she said. "I'm Sammy Ingram. One of the girls of the apartment. You are Mr. Banister, aren't you?"

"Yes, that's right." Mark's face smiled in her direction but his eyes still followed Donna. "I feel as if I had arrived on Mars or some other strange star. The Christmas *décor,* I suppose, and so many strangers. It's a very lovely effect, including the guests. And the hostesses," he added.

"Thank you" was the demure reply.

"Donna is radiating joy as usual," he said, his eyes still intent upon her. "She is the happiest person I ever saw. Happiness seems to surround her like an aura."

"You think she's happy? That's strange. And you know her so well! I thought her happy manner was an extremely clever and

original defense mechanism. Something she thought up herself, and a good job of thinking."

"You don't think Donna is happy?" he ejaculated and in the shock of that thought he turned and looked directly at the girl beside him. His eyes widened and his lips parted in quick surprise. "How beautiful you are!" he exclaimed.

"Yes" was the quiet answer.

"You—you're unbelievably beautiful," he said, staring at her dazedly. "I—I hadn't looked at you before. I've never seen anyone so beautiful."

"Yes," she assented again. "It is my business."

"Your business! You mean cosmetics?"

She laughed, soft, liquid laughter. "No, I mean beauty. I use it professionally. I am a model."

"Do you live here in the apartment with the other girls? I can't say I blame them for keeping their boy friends far removed," he said sincerely.

"Oh, I'm no menace. Nobody's afraid of me. And I'm all tied up with my own affairs. So you think Donna's air of sheer joy is genuine and not a subtle and clever mask?"

"I have always thought it was genuine. I think the only unhappiness she ever had was when Dave, her brother, died in the war. And that sadness, too, she took bravely. She certainly looks happy."

"Yes, I know. But think what a perfect mask happiness is if there is something you wish to conceal. If one looks sick or tired or worried, people just naturally ask questions. 'What's the matter? How come?' But behind a joyous face like that, who would ever suspect some secret sadness or hidden worry."

Mark glanced back to Donna. She was pinching the ear of the man with whom she danced. The man quite obviously was enjoying it.

"Don't you think she's happy?" he asked soberly, turning back to Sammy Ingram.

"I have never thought so. I think she has evolved a brilliant, original method of avoiding bothersome questions."

"Do you like her?" he asked quickly.

"Very much. She is by far my favorite of all the girls. But fond of her as I am, and admiring her as I do, I still would not try to pry behind her clever and becoming mask. You will admit that happiness becomes her."

"A defense mechanism," he mused uneasily. "I wonder. I suppose all girls have them, one kind or another. You must need a pretty powerful one to take care of you."

"Oh, no. Mine is too simple and childish for words. Not comparable to Donna's. When I observe that an unwanted inordinate interest is beginning to develop I look uneasily at my watch and say that I must keep an eye on the time, I have a date with my fiancé and that is one appointment I am never late for."

Mark laughed. "Have you a fiancé?"

"Yes, that part is authentic. I have a fiancé but he does not beat me up when I am late."

"Is he here tonight?" Mark asked with quick interest.

"No. He is very busy. He doesn't care much for this kind of party and doesn't want to waste the time. He is studying for the ministry."

"The ministry! The church? You mean you are going to marry a preacher?"

"Yes."

Mark clutched his head in both hands. "The world is certainly cockeyed," he exclaimed. "You, going to marry a preacher!"

"Yes, the world is pretty cockeyed. But Red and I aren't. We're absolutely sane and have our four feet firmly planted on solid ground."

"Red? Your fiancé? Is he red by principle or ——"

"By act of God," she said gaily. "He was born redheaded, that's all. You'll like him."

"I'd certainly like to meet him," Mark said heartily. "How

did it happen anyhow? Some sudden infatuation, love at first sight, attraction of opposites, that sort of thing? They say those things do happen but they do not always last."

"There was nothing sudden about it. And ours has lasted and is going to last. We've been working on it over nine years. It started in college. The war slowed us down and put a crimp in our plans, so Red is working overtime now to make up. Just one more year between us and the altar. It was in the war that he decided to enter the ministry. At first he was headed for social service and politics but during the war he discovered that a minister has one big advantage to start with, people's confidence. If he doesn't live up to it, it is gone and he cannot get it back. But he has it to begin with. So Red decided to make the ministry his spring-board."

"I see," Mark commented stiffly. "I always understood one was supposed to be—well, called to enter the ministry."

"Red was called," Sammy said serenely.

Donna slowed her partner to a stop before them. "You're wasting a lot of time, Sammy," she said. "Mark is a very good dancer."

"Also a good conversationalist" was the smiling answer. "Though I am afraid I have done most of the talking."

Answering an almost imperceptible gesture from Donna, Mark offered his arm for dancing.

"I haven't finished yet," he said to Sammy. "I want to hear more. Let me see you again."

She nodded agreement and danced away with the older man.

"Like her?" Donna asked, snuggling her cheek against his.

"I don't know." Mark was still bewildered and a little troubled. "She's so beautiful you don't have time to think whether you like her."

"Yes, I know. She wears her beauty so easily it comes like a shock when you realize it. I'd met her a couple of times before it occurred to me what a beauty she really is. But be warned by

me. You stick to the bowlegged boss's daughter. Sammy is all but signed up in the marriage register right now. Are you having a good time?"

"Yes, I guess so. I'm a little groggy. I think my first hunch was right and I really am on Mars. How did you get up here?"

"I live here. Remember? Come and have a drink. That's the worst thing about beauty, it has such a staggeringly sobering effect."

They danced into the dining room and were drawn into another wave of introductions and light talk. When again they were comparatively alone, Mark commented dryly, "The gentleman or words to that effect falling off the chair behind the piano, must be very high alcoholically or very low physically. I've noticed the girls fortifying him with black coffee, without noticeable effect."

"That's Joey. He's drunk," Donna explained cheerfully. "He always is, at parties. He is the one who always arrives first and never gets around to signing out because somebody else has to cart him home. He's trying to be an artist."

"Whose friend is he?" Mark asked, with pronounced distaste.

"He is everybody's friend. Poor lamb! He can't afford to drink except at parties so he pitches right in and gets soused early. To ward against possible shortages as the party progresses, maybe."

"Sponging two ways, eh?"

"Oh, he's no sponger. He figures if anybody invites him to a party, he is entitled to a grand and glorious binge on the house. He won't accept a drink any other time because he can't afford to reciprocate. He's very poor. And he helps out other ways to make up. He made our invitations for us and wouldn't let us pay him a cent, though we begged him. And he was here all day running errands for us and helping heave furniture. He'll come tomorrow, too, and help move things back. He can't afford to give parties himself so he helps other people give theirs."

"I see." Mark's voice was still grudging.

"He does other things for us, too," she went on defensively.

"He's frightfully hard up but he's determined to plug along and make himself an artist. His family lives on a farm somewhere upstate. They send him boxes of food sometimes and he always gives us part of it. And in fruit season they send him whole boxes, berries and apples and grapes, and he brings it straight to us. But Leda thought up a slick way to make him get his share of it. She's very clever."

"Who is Leda?"

"One of us. That girl sitting on the back of the divan between those two men."

Mark's eyes followed her indication. A bright-faced blonde, perched on the top of the settee, was painstakingly twisting a man's hair into thin wisps and tying them with bits of bright-colored Christmas ribbon. Mark's grunt expressed dispassionate disinterest.

"She is a brilliant and wonderful girl," Donna said defensively. "High moral principles and all that. She's in social service. She figured out that by canning Joey's fruit we could make him take part of it home to eke out his very meager cuisine, for half the time he nearly starves. So he comes and helps peel and stir, and we furnish the sugar and cans and divide the results. Wasn't that slick? Joey's very proud but he couldn't object to that."

"Not bad," Mark assented. "Not at all bad."

"She clothes him, too," Donna continued.

"Clothes him! You mean he lets a woman buy his clothes!"

"Oh, no. He wouldn't do that. We wouldn't either. As I told you, Leda is all out for social service and is always mixed up in some project for bundles for somebody, somewhere. So when she collects something that would fit Joey she passes it along to him. After all, he needs bundles as badly as anybody. We have him pretty well decked out now."

Mark cast a considering glance at the collapsed figure behind the piano. "Is he about my size? I've got a few spares around. Slimmer, isn't he, but about my height?"

"We had a ghastly time shoeing him. You know how the shoe situation has been, with rations and shortages. Nobody was giving away shoes that could be put together again. So one of us upped with a shoe ration and we bought him a new pair. But we had to make them look worn or he would be suspicious. So we sloshed them in mud and water and scratched them with an ice pick and then took turns plopping around the house in them to limber up the soles and when we got them messy enough to be acceptable Leda passed them along to him. Those are the shoes he has on now. They are the only ones he has."

Mark looked, with an interest now touched with respect, at the frivolous figure perched on top of the sofa back. At the moment she was trying out the effect of her brilliant rhinestone combs in the dark hair of the man beside her.

"Just taking a night off from servicing society, I suppose," he said.

"No. She's too tired to dance. She's too tired to stand up. She's just trying to amuse herself sitting down. She was up all night last night. One of her clients up in Harlem had a fit. They chivvied the woman off to the hospital in an ambulance but they couldn't find anybody to take over the three little pickaninnies so Leda stayed and did it herself. One of them was sick, too. Leda didn't get home until two this afternoon and the place was bedlam getting ready for the party so she couldn't get any rest at all. She is virtually dead on her feet."

Unaccountably there was a stricture in Mark's throat. He swallowed hard. He looked about him with quickened interest and with abashment, wondering what else lay behind the foolish laughter, the idle talk, the ludicrous gestures and the hilarious sideplays.

There was Joey, trying to be an artist, drunk behind the piano, wearing shoes the girls had bought and broken for him. There was Leda, virtually dead on her feet as Donna said, now trying the effect of make-up from a small vanity on the well-satisfied

man beside her. There was Sammy, of breath-taking beauty, waiting to marry a red-headed preacher, floating dreamily around in some man's arms to the tune of "Good King Wenceslas" rendered in waltz time by the accordionist atop the piano. And here beside him was Donna, whom he loved, whose happy face Sammy thought was a shrewd mask for a secret sadness. He felt abject and humbled.

"Sorry," a man's voice cut in briskly, "time to break this up. This is a party. No markets cornered tonight."

Donna danced away with him. Mark watched them frowningly for a moment then abruptly strode into the room to Sammy and her escort. "Sorry," he said. "Just got cut in on. Have to do as been done by."

The man nodded, laughing, and relinquished Sammy to him.

"I was coming back anyhow," she said. "Dance me over to the hall door and we'll go into my room. The whole house is open tonight."

Mark dutifully guided her to the door and she led the way to her room, the master bedroom, where the bed was draped in an Indian blanket and piled with cushions, to give an effect of living instead of sleeping there.

Sammy gestured him to a chair and seated herself near him.

"I did not have time to do Red justice," she began, a trace of briskness in her mellow voice. "I must straighten that out. Red knew from the beginning what he wanted to do. He knew before he even entered college. He was taking all courses that would help him understand social and civic problems, personal, national, international. He wanted to work effectively with groups organized to solve the problems and effect a general betterment. His father was a minister, but in the war, for the first time, Red realized how the general public reacts to agents of the church. The GI's, always so suspicious of new officers, distrustful, mentally armed against them, were invariably willing to give the chaplains a square deal. No bias. No prejudice. If the new chaplain fell down on his job

and lost their respect, he could never win it back. But he had it to begin with. The chaplains didn't start with two strikes against them as other officers did. So he decided to add theology to his course of training. That's all. But I want you to understand how it was."

"Then he isn't going to be a regular preacher?"

"Yes, he is. He's preaching now. He has a kind of mission church down in the lower East Side and he holds services there regularly. I go too. I sing in the choir. I suppose what he has in mind for the future would not be considered an orthodox church. Maybe more of a social or community group with church as the locale. But he is already preaching, he is a good preacher, and he is going to preach."

"You mean he is going to preach clean politics instead of religion?"

"No. He is going to preach goodness and goodness implies reform, civic, social, economic, political and spiritual. I can't explain it very well. Part of it I do not understand myself. But I believe in Red. And I know that if he happens to get off on the wrong foot on some points, he is honest enough and brave enough to do a rightabout-face in double-quick time."

"You really love him, don't you?" Mark said slowly.

"Yes," she said. The one word was music on her lips and her exquisite face was illuminated.

Mark smiled at her. "And how will you fit into this ministerial-political setup?"

"Nicely. But perhaps I flatter myself." She laughed softly. "I'm working at it too, you know. Getting ready. Keeping up my music, studying comparative religions, child care and hygiene——"

"You mean you're going in for a big family? With a figure like yours?"

She laughed again. "Not that exactly. Though I know I will never be satisfied until I have a few little Reds galumphing around under my feet. But in a church dedicated to social service we'll

need a child specialist since social service begins with children. Maybe it ends with them, too. Anyhow, I am going to be our child specialist. We can't afford to hire one."

"Were you always interested in—well, this sort of thing?"

"Heavens, no. In college I was considered the most frivolous member of the most frivolous sorority on the campus. In fact, I was voted the one most likely to succeed to a long line of very rich husbands. It was an awful jolt to poor Red when he fell in love with me. He thought at first he would have to abandon his whole career."

Bells tingled in the living room and the music and the dancing stopped.

"We must go now," Sammy said, rising quickly. "That's our post Santa Claus arriving. He's to distribute gifts while we get the buffet supper set up in the dining room. We're going to sing carols, too."

"But listen! Wait a minute. Can't I see you again? I'm—I'm awfully interested. Will you have luncheon with me? Some day, any day you can. But soon. Some day this week?"

She hesitated only slightly. "Yes. Wednesday is the only day I have. From one to two-fifteen. Any place you like. But the service must be fairly swift. I only have an hour and a quarter."

"I'll find a place," he said eagerly. "I'll let you know. Thanks very much, Miss——"

"Just call me Sammy," she said pleasantly.

Santa Claus, appropriately and rather elegantly accoutered, had deposited two large bags in the center of the living room, a red bag for the ladies, blue for the men, and was happily distributing the gifts.

"Take note of Santy," Sammy whispered before she left to assist the other hostesses in the dining room. "He's the very dignified man who was dancing with Donna. He's a banker. He never misses a chance to dress up. He loves it."

The gifts, an amazing and amusing collection of trifles frankly

rifled from the holiday surplusage, were duly distributed and the odd assortment of guests sang Christmas carols to the accordion with surprising gusto and some little talent. Then the guests were summoned to the dining room where the bountifully laden table was greeted with uproarious laughter, cheers of approval, acknowlegdment of recognitions.

"Oh, ho! So that's where my imported pickles went!"

"How'r'ya, Smoked Turkey, nice to see you again!"

"Oh, there's Aunt Belinda's fruitcake!"

"Don't tell me that's the wizened-up little Virginia ham Uncle Roddy sent me!"

Mark wandered off by himself and found Joey, trying to be an artist, slumped wretchedly in the chair behind the piano. His brow and hands were clammy wet. Mark soaked a towel in cold water and mopped his face and hands. Then, without speaking, Joey unresisting, he guided him unostentatiously down the hall to one of the open doors. He swept the cushions from the day bed to the floor and eased Joey down upon it. As he pulled a light blanket over him he took particular notice of the size of his feet. Not quite as big as his own, but near enough.

Then he raised the window, turned off the lights and went out, closing the door behind him.

The after-Christmas party, as he inscribed sedately, with unwavering pen, on the checking-out page of the guest book, had been a unique and unforgettable experience.

9

MARK awaited his luncheon appointment with Sammy Ingram in a state of surprising excitement. There was nothing personal in his eagerness of anticipation. It was not at all comparable to the possessive, burning ardor with which for so long he had looked forward to seeing Donna. Trying to analyze his own feelings, he decided there was something oddly impersonal about ineffable beauty, something abstract and remote. He told himself amusedly that it was something like having a rendezvous with one of the Seven Wonders.

He could visualize her perfectly and did, with pleasant frequency. He could see again the exquisite oval of her face, the smooth ivory of her throat, the delicate contours of all her features, the shining upsweep of her blue-black hair. Her eyes, he mused reflectively, did not at all correspond to his preconceived notions of perfect beauty. There was nothing wrong with her eyes, deep blue and brilliant, long-lashed, tenderly framed by arching brows. It was the expression, the life in them, that seemed contradictory.

He had fancied, from what he had read, from pictures he had seen, or perhaps from what he had only dreamed, that the eyes of ineffable beauty would be mysterious, fathomless, inviting and yet probing, searching for responsive depths, drawing out unsuspected fires of passion. Sammy's expression was straightforward and serene. That was the word. Serene. Their brightness was that of steadfast, unswervable purpose, unwavering determination. That was not the spirit in the eyes of beauty as he had imagined it.

He could see her again, her movements, every slight gesture of head and hands and feet; how she walked and danced; with what easy unaffected grace, a lissome assuredness showing in so much as the lift of a finger. Posture, he knew, could be studied, and carriage and gesture. But surely such infinite grace could not be learned by rote without some innate, secret power prompting muscles, nerves and tendons, even sordid bones, and binding them to expressive harmony.

Impersonal. That was it.

Back of his excitement lurked a disturbing idea that Sammy Ingram was a wise woman. It was not the worldly wisdom of sophistication, but the infinite wisdom of inner quiet. Wisdom. That, too, was impersonal. Wisdom had to be impersonal. When elements of intimacy intrude, judgment is biased and wisdom itself falls prey to human nature. But when, in history, did wisdom and beauty walk hand in hand?

Yet Sammy Ingram with all her beauty, had a personal side, a side quite apart from matchless beauty and innate wisdom. She was in love. She was going to be married. For nine years she had looked forward to that marriage, had worked in preparation for it. Love and betrothal represent the ultimate essence of the strictly personal.

He half suspected Red, the man of whom she had spoken, whom she loved, of practicing some form of black magic upon her. He had bewitched her. He wondered how, otherwise, this Red had dared aspire to the possession of such perfection. He did not envy him. The lovely dearness of Donna was still his heart's desire.

He selected the place for their meeting with meticulous care. It must be mid-town, for her convenience; quiet, for he would not miss one wise word of her low, warm voice; rather expensive, but not ostentatious; good, but not show-off. Show-off, he knew intuitively, Sammy would not like.

He remembered countless times when he and Donna had dashed into roadside diners for coffee and doughnuts, into Childs for hot

cakes, into odd little hole-in-the-wall cafés to experiment with foods and atmosphere. He smiled to think of Sammy Ingram drifting, goddess-like, into such dives. He laughed to think of the gapes and gasps of amazement with which she would be regarded. Then he sobered quickly. It would not be an amusing experience, it would be embarrassing. And, he thought honestly, it would not embarrass her; it would embarrass him. Sammy was too serene, in her beauty and her wisdom, to feel confusion.

Boyishly, he made excuses for the extra care he accorded his appearance on Wednesday. He told himself it was merely that he did not want strangers to wonder why she picked up such a hayseed. He wore his best, most conservative business suit and selected other accessories to correspond. Anyhow I don't look rich, he assured himself comfortingly; nobody can take me for a sugar daddy.

He regarded his fellow workers, even his copartners, with a sort of smug amusement on that morning. They wouldn't believe it if he told them. And if one of them ran into him by chance, saw him with her, he would never hear the last of it.

He watched the time, remembering that she had only an hour and a quarter to give him. She could say a good deal in an hour and a quarter but not a second of it was expendable, for there was importance in her softest word.

When she entered the doorway of the lounge where he had arranged to meet her he got to his feet with sudden breathlessness, realizing, with a sharp shock, that she was, unbelievably, more beautiful than he remembered. Her brilliant eyes showed pleasure but serenity with it, a warm serenity. In his momentary shock he had stopped short and she started toward him, smiling, gloved hand outstretched. It was not until Mark reached her and took her hand that he saw she was not alone. Looming complacently behind her was a man whose shock of bronze-red hair was ample introduction.

"You said you would like to meet Red, Mr. Banister," Sammy was saying. "So I took the liberty of bringing him along. Red, this is Mark Banister."

The two men shook hands. It was a gripping, appraising handshake. Mark said he was delighted that she had brought him, and, somewhat to his surprise, he was delighted. Bringing Red, who had no time for parties, was a compliment, flattery of the most subtle sort, no doubt, but definitely a compliment.

"Now, you see, Sammy," Red said reproachfully, "a guy can so be good-looking and not a sissy."

At Mark's puzzled look he gestured to Sammy. "Her," he explained. "She tries to comfort me for my ugly mug by telling me good-lookers are sissies."

Red was not good-looking. His face, his features, were big. His body was big. He looked, Mark thought quickly, a good ten years older than Sammy.

"I'm only thirty-two," Red said, interpreting Mark's glance. "And she's twenty-nine. It's the war on me and cosmetics on her that make the difference."

Mark, feeling unaccountably young and inexperienced, led the way into the dining room and, managing to concentrate on his duties as host, told the head waiter there would be three instead of two.

"If you're disappointed at not having Sammy alone," Red said magnanimously, "you can invite her again next Wednesday."

"You said you wanted to meet him," Sammy said again. "And since he had the time off——"

"I didn't have time off," Red corrected her sternly. "I took it. From Sammy's report, and Sammy is a good reporter, I figured you were worth meeting, so I played hooky."

"I can't tell you how glad I am," Mark said sincerely. "I've thought more about you two these last four days than I have about my business. Almost more than about Donna. I have al-

ready ordered. I did it to save time. I hope it will be all right. I didn't know about a cocktail?" He glanced inquiringly at Red.

"Not for me this noon, if you don't mind. I have to make a speech at three."

"I have to hustle back to work," said Sammy. "I owe my job a clean breath."

"Same here," Mark agreed.

He could not resist one long look about the quiet, well-filled room—smartly dressed, good-looking people; nothing show-off. And, as he had anticipated, many eyes were turned to Sammy and there was whispering at some tables.

"Yes, you're right," Red remarked smilingly. "We've got the best-looking gal in the room. I've quit looking to make sure. I know from experience."

Mark flushed slightly. "Are you studying mind reading along with your other courses?" he asked.

"No. But the first study of mankind is man, and, brother, I've concentrated on it ever since I met Sammy."

"I'm a little uneasy," Mark said, striving for nonchalance. "How soon do you usually begin winning converts and influencing voters?"

"I don't. That's old stuff. Now we just play the sucker along until he comes up for air and then we nail him. Sammy says you don't think religion and politics make good bedfellows."

"That isn't exactly what I said." Mark blushed and hated himself for it.

"That isn't exactly what I said, either," Sammy interpolated quickly.

"No. But it's a rough résumé of a long and tiresome tirade," Red admitted pleasantly.

"Well, she said——" Mark began hesitantly. Red interrupted him.

"Mind if we cut out formalities and buckle right down to first names? We can't go on all our lives Mistering and Missing each

other can we? And 'he' and 'she' sound ridiculous. We're going to be friends, aren't we?"

"I hope so," Mark said sincerely.

"I already am," said Sammy.

"O.K. Now go back where I broke in. Sammy said——"

"Sammy sort of suggested that perhaps you would use the church as a springboard to politics. But when she explained it later, I found that wasn't exactly what she said, either. Playing politics from the pulpit—maybe it's all right but it sort of rubbed me the wrong way. Maybe I'm too easily rubbed."

"Not at all. It's very important. The real problem is the masses of people who never get rubbed at all. One way or the other. When they are like that, it's very hard to start them off thinking. People who are easily rubbed are usually willing to do a little thinking when they get around to it. As for politics, well, politics may enter in; maybe not. What I really want is to have a hand in the training of future leadership."

"Sammy says you are going to preach, preach regular sermons from the Bible, but tying in social, national and international affairs. Frankly it sounds to me like a tall order."

"Frankly it is. I like tall orders. A sermon is a speech based on a text from the Bible and conveying a moral and spiritual message. Is that your definition of a sermon?"

"Yes, I guess so. I never thought much about the definition of a sermon."

"All right. Now, as a starter, I will give you two texts, very brief ones, with which I can tie up spiritual experience and the immediate state of the community, the nation and the world at large. On those two texts I could preach a sermon a day the rest of my life without exhausting the subject."

"I'm listening."

"First—'Am I my brother's keeper?' The guy that said that was a murderer. A murderer! You don't have to stretch it far by inference to make it a warmaker. Also, by inference, consider the

opposite concept—that we *are* our brothers' keepers. Otherwise we line ourselves up with the murderer, the warmaker. Plenty of leeway there, eh?"

Mark laughed. "All right. I'll grant you that one."

"Second—'You shall love your neighbor as yourself.' Lots of far-reaching implications and ramifications on those seven words."

"Yes, I suppose so." Mark spoke questioningly, implied uncertainty.

"Why, sure!" Red was smilingly confident. "Suppose I have a church in a city where there is a vicious slum settlement, breeding disease, abnormality and eventual crime. Have I got a right to indicate to my listeners, if I have any, that they and I are the sires of that slum?"

Mark smiled suddenly. "Why not?"

"Why not indeed! And suppose somewhere in the world, in our nation, in any nation, there is a man or a group of men or a mob or an army denying the inalienable rights of peace and freedom to anybody they can intimidate or subjugate. Have I the right to suggest that we, 'loving our neighbors as ourselves,' are the smug sponsors, the protectors if not the instigators of that menace? Neighbor means nation as well as next door."

Mark laughed again. "Let me know when you preach your first sermon. I'll be there if I have to travel halfway round the world."

"Too late. I'm already preaching. I've been preaching quite a while. I have a little moth-eaten chapel down near the water front. I pay the rent on it myself. I harangue there every Saturday night and twice on Sunday. And on off nights I go around to missions and rallies and rough-and-tumble street brawls every time I get the chance. I horn into the discussion and get in a few remarks if I can. If I can't, I just heckle."

"You heckle!"

"In a gentlemanly and ministerial way. I phrase a question carefully to emphasize a point I want made. If the speaker is on my side, but not bringing out the particular point, I word the in-

quiry to suggest that my own opinion is the opposite. That spurs him on to emphatic defense. Did you ever try street heckling, Mark? Or try combating it? It's one of the most stimulating and inspiring experiences in the world."

Mark looked at Sammy with an exaggerated expression of wonder. "Do he and I actually belong, not only to the same race and nation, but the same identical sex?"

"Oh, we're not so far apart," Red said. "We'll hit it off fine. The only difference is that I am learning to be a leader and to train leaders. You are satisfied to be a well-informed, conscientious follower, which is far more important."

"I do not even like crowds," Mark objected. "I do not care for clubs and organizations and group movements. They seem to me nothing more than a rostrum for two or three headstrong fanatics to lord it over a bunch of voiceless hangers-on."

"Yes. That's why you are so important. We need trained listeners, vocal hangers-on. Trained leaders have to train the hangers-on, as you call them. Even if they continue voiceless, they can be trained to effective and powerful silence, and whether in agreement or opposition doesn't make a particle of difference as long as it is powerful. I don't care whether you agree with me, Mark. You can probably be a more valuable friend if you honestly and frankly stand on the other side of the fence. But I guarantee you I will respect your sincerity. I daresay I will be wrong in detail as often as I am right, maybe oftener. But I will be honest about it."

"How long have you two been engaged?" Mark asked abruptly.

"Nine years and two months," Sammy said frankly.

Mark shook his head uneasily. "I should think——" He broke off suddenly and shook his head. "Who am I to think? It seems to me that you two are asking a lot more of life than I ever did. You are asking, and you expect to get it. Maybe my aspirations weren't high enough. But they were normal. Of course, they included Donna. She was the motivating factor. Otherwise, it doesn't seem that my demands were exorbitant."

"Are the details secret?" Red asked quietly.

"Not at all. I wanted a wife, Donna. I wanted to make enough money so we wouldn't be too cramped and have to figure too closely. I do not mean have all the luxuries and extravagances and excesses of the very rich. Just pleasant, comfortable, normal things. I wanted to have children C.O.D. with no mortgage on their layettes and play pens. We saw that money nightmare haunt so many of our friends, haunt some of them out of house and home and into divorce and disruption. They married without any security, married too quickly. They couldn't or didn't face the financial squeeze. And phooey! It was all off. And they were nice people, too, our friends. So I determined we shouldn't handicap ourselves with that. I waited until I could support Donna decently and have children with no lien on them. Maybe I shouldn't have waited. I don't know. It hasn't worked out."

"We are on the same side of the fence right now, Mark. You are right. Those are the normal decent ambitions. But you will be surprised to know that a lot of people aren't educated up to them. They do not know what good things to wish and work for. Just as most of us do not know what to pray for. That's from the Bible, too, Mark, by the way. Millions of people need leaders to teach them that your identical desires are the great desirables of life. I want to be one of those leaders and to help train others. First, to educate people up to the great desirables and then to assure their possibility of attainment to every man, and to every nation."

"I had the right desirables, then, but merely failed personally of their attainment."

"Not at all. Hang onto your desirables. Hug them closer than ever. Just wait and don't let personalities intrude too much. Eliminate the name calling for a while. Say wife instead of Donna. You'll see Donna of course, but the wife is your desirable. And if it is to be Donna, and it probably is, it will be Donna."

Sammy looked at her watch.

"Sorry, boys. My time is up. I shall have to skip coffee. You both talk too much. Red has another thirty minutes, Mark. Stay and argue it out. Red will give me a brief on it later."

Mark walked to the entrance with her.

"It was fine, Mark," she said, giving him her small hand. "Maybe he's a little crazy but I love him very much."

"He is probably a great genius," Mark said gravely, holding her hand. "I hope he does not die in some garret of starvation and a broken heart."

"Hope rather that his ideology, while it will certainly change, may steadily grow and never be shattered. And I shall try to be a panacea for the starvation and the broken heart."

"I will help you if I can. Thank you, Sammy, for bringing him. And for coming," he added hastily. "Wrong sequence there."

"No. Right sequence. Absolutely right."

He shook his head in vague bewilderment. "You're a brave pair. I don't see how you dared."

"You mean the church?"

"Oh, no. I mean waiting so long, when you knew just what you wanted and had it right within your grasp."

Sammy laughed. "We believe it was well worth waiting for."

"It wasn't money with you at all, was it?"

"Oh, no. Between us we have enough to live on quite comfortably. But we're saving as much as we can. We shall probably have to support our church for the first ten years or so. Good-by, Mark, and thank you. We'll be seeing you."

Mark went slowly back to the table where Red, still standing, awaited him.

"She is so beautiful," he said dully, "it seems absolutely unbelievable. As soon as she is out of sight, I quit believing it."

"I think the rarest thing about Sammy," Red said thoughtfully, "is her perfect synchronization of body, soul and spirit. You can't help feeling that a beautiful soul should be housed in

physical perfection, but it very seldom is. Sammy is a visible demonstration of physical and spiritual harmony, if you know what I mean. Sammy is a great soul."

"Was she always?" Mark asked. "I mean, when she was young, when you first knew her? Or is part of it a development under your tender tutelage?"

"No. I'm sorry, but I must disavow all credit. I think she was always like that. Perhaps unconsciously at first, but it was there. She was gay and frolicsome and loved all light and lovely things, music, dancing, dramatics, color. She still does. But I never once knew her to do or say one nasty or shoddy thing. And she never rode her beauty hard as many do. She was glad she had it, but she never used it as a means. She always pulled its punches. With men, particularly. Even before I entered the picture she was always clever enough and kind enough to make her withdrawal before men completely lost their hearts and went mad over her. She didn't pull any punches with me, though," he added smiling. "She gave me the works."

"You seem to have thrived under it."

"After the first lightning bolt, I took it and cried for more. Like Castoria. But that first night, when I realized I was in head over heels, I walked the streets all night trying to decide whether to shake the dust of that campus off my feet and mop Sammy's lipstick off my face, or whether it was Sammy forever and ever amen."

"I infer that it was Sammy."

"Yeh. But at first I accepted it as a hazard, fool that I was. I thought, O.K., everybody has a thorn in his flesh, even St. Paul. More Bible, Mark. Well, if Sammy was to be my thorn I'd put up with it the best I could. I felt quite noble about it. Aren't men damned fools?"

"Yes," Mark assented moodily. "But at least some of us outgrow it. It would seem to me," he went on, "that Sammy would

be an asset to—well, to anything: to the White House, to the Vatican, even to heaven."

"Sure," Red assented heartily. "I realized that, even then. But I couldn't figure out how she could be anything but a liability in the program I had laid out. Mark, you can help us if you feel like it."

"Me!" Mark was startled, rather horrified.

"Yes. There's one thing, for all our careful planning, that Sammy and I neglected. That is cultivating friends. Friendship, like everything else, takes time. We allowed time for everything except friendship. It was a bad blunder. We need friendship."

Mark was flattered but humble. "I fail to see where my friendship could mean anything to you and Sammy. You have everything. I have nothing to contribute."

"Yes, you have. Affection first if you happen to like us, and patience and good-humored ridicule to laugh us back into line if we become fanatical. Honest difference of opinion between friends is invaluable. This lack of warm friendship was tough on Sammy during the war. She laid out her own schedule and hewed to it heroically. But it was not easy. You can see how things were. Men, always on the make. Women, anxious to show off her beauty and adorn their little dinners and dances, a prize package for the few available men to grab for. So she just worked hard and steered wide and clear of entangling alliances."

"How about the girls where she lives? In the apartment?"

"They are friendly enough but not friends. She told me she was sure she and Donna could be friends but Donna will not have it. She wants friendliness but not friendship. Friendship, I think, has to be honest, or nearly honest. Donna is not honest."

"I have known her all her life," Mark said quietly, but without resentment. "I have never known her to lie."

"Not with her lips, perhaps." Red paused to light a cigarette. Mark stared grimly at his cup. Not with her lips? Not in words

perhaps. But her kisses had lied. "There is a dishonesty there somewhere," Red went on. "She is bitter and disillusioned about something. Sammy says, and Sammy is no fool, that Donna has capacity for great friendship and great love but she has worn her disguise a long time and it fits her very well. I have a hunch that it would help her if you could dig down and find the roots of that dishonesty. It has to have roots. But she has planted it pretty deeply. Anyhow," he went on more lightly, "for the present her friendship can be dispensed with. Yours is quite valuable to us. That is why I took time off to come today. Sammy liked you and thought you liked her."

"I did. I do."

"She thought you and I might hit it off fairly well. So here I am." Red smiled at him.

Mark's eyes stung with a sudden strange emotion. He was not happy. He was groping in the dark, not knowing for what he was looking or how to find it. Red's words were an unexpected ray of light in the gray of his shadows.

"I wish I had something to offer," he said humbly. "I feel such a dope. I feel like a gawkish schoolboy. I'm nearly as old as you. But you mapped out your travel chart years ago and you've stuck to it. You know where you are going and what you will do when you get there. Except that I have a better job, I'm just where I was when I fell in love with Donna years ago."

"Oh, no, you're not. Not by a long sight. Let me have your address, will you? A large part of our social isolation, Sammy's and mine, is my fault. Sheer selfishness. I've always been piggish about Sammy. What little time I had to spare, I, a glutton at heart, wanted to have alone with Sammy. All very pleasant, I admit, but not at all farsighted."

Mark, with an eagerness that set his fingers shaking, scribbled his home address and telephone number on the back of a business card.

"How about week ends?" he asked. "I have a place in the

country, up where Donna lives. Plenty of room. Do you care for outdoor sports?"

"Brother, the figure beneath this well-tailored suit is all me, not well-placed pads. I was a damn good halfback. I can shoot a decent game of golf and I'll tackle anybody but pros at tennis. But week ends are my toughest times. Don't forget my little chapel on the water front! Holidays we both usually take off but according to my calender our next holiday is to celebrate one G. Washington's rendezvous with the stork."

"There are a thousand things I want to ask you," Mark said. "It will take forever to find out the things I want to know about you. And I don't give a damn, Red, whether you're right or not. I don't even know what you are trying to be right about. I want to know but it won't make any difference. If you're wrong, you're the damnedest right wrong guy I ever ran across."

They parted at the entrance, Red to catch an uptown bus on the avenue. Mark watched him until he had disappeared down the street. Then he flung his cigarette to the curb and strode back into the restaurant. He went to a telephone booth.

His lips were tight and his eyes hard as he dialed a number, the number of Donna's home in New Jersey, not her office, not her apartment domicile. Her home in New Jersey.

"Hello, Mother Collwell? This is Mark."

"Oh, hello, Mark. How are you?"

"Are you alone, Mrs. Collwell? I want to talk to you. May I come over?"

"Yes, I'm alone, Mark. Do come. Come for dinner. Alan is in Chicago and Donna isn't coming tonight. I'll love having you."

"Not for dinner, thanks. I'd like to come now. I'm taking the afternoon off. I want to see you right away."

"Of course, Mark. Come right over."

10

"HELLO, Mother Collwell."

Mark put his arm around her and kissed her, realizing with sudden dismay that she was smaller, slighter than he remembered; older, too, and a little pale. Her smile was warmly affectionate but her eyes were misty. Or perhaps it was merely that everything on this day had struck him with a strange, intangible sense of shock. He hugged her boyishly.

"I want to talk to you about Donna," he said abruptly.

"A very easy inference, Mark," she said pleasantly. "Come in and sit down. I am always glad to see you, no matter whether you have anything special to talk about. And after all, it's always Donna, isn't it? How's the partnership?"

"Fine, thanks. Not as exciting as I had anticipated. And a boss by any other name is still the boss. It seems quiet in here, doesn't it? There's usually such a mob milling about."

"Yes, it's quiet. All the days and most of the evenings. Donna does not get home as often as she used to and even when she is here the old crowd is pretty much tied up with babies and bills and recipes."

"You say poor Dad is out West again."

"Yes. But, Mark, we have wonderful news about Chicago. Alan is nearly through there. He is turning the Chicago office over to new men. That's what he is working on now. They have quite a few of the old men back and have taken on some very good new ones and Dad says there is no reason in the world why they can't run it themselves. No more commuting trips to Chicago! He is as

tickled as a child with giant-size bubble gum. So am I. It will be such a relief to him, and to me, too. Isn't it wonderful?"

"It certainly is. He always hated those trips, didn't he? I can see how natural it was for me to fall in love with Donna. I was in love with the whole family from the very first. Donna was the obvious, ultimate concentration, wasn't she?"

"We thought so, Mark. It seemed very natural to us. And very nice."

"I was always a little jealous of Dave, having a family, this family. My grandfather and the great-aunts were fine to me and I had nothing to complain of but they never seemed like a family to me. Not like this family."

"You were almost as much one of us as David and Donna," she said. "I hope you will stay that way, Mark."

"Do you remember the time Dave and I swiped Doc Chalmers' new car and smashed it to smithereens on a telephone pole?"

"Heavens, yes. I shall never forget it. It still seems a miracle you were not both killed."

"Not a scratch on the pair of us."

"We never found out whose idea it was, taking the car in the first place. David thought he suggested it, and you thought you did. Do you remember?"

"Mrs. Collwell, I give you my word, I think we did not so much as mention it. We stopped to admire the new car. Then we noticed the door was open and the motor was running. We slid in and off we went."

"David was driving, though."

"Yes, of course. My grandfather had never let me touch the wheel of a car. He was very strict about it. But Dad Collwell had let Dave steer and manipulate the gears and run the car in and out of the driveway. So of course he drove. We were only going around the block. At least, I think so. We didn't mention that, either. The dressing down Dad gave us about that car was my first lesson in domestic economy."

"He never told us what he said and you boys were mighty mum about it, too. But I remember he collected a dollar a month from your allowance for a full year."

Mark smiled. "I'll never forget that night. He took us into the library and closed the door. He showed us the check he had written for Doc Chalmers. Nine hundred dollars. He said Doc's insurance company would sue to hold him responsible if he refused, and legally he would be held responsible. His son was driving. It was a stolen car. He wished to avoid the expense and notoriety of a trial and reminded us that, being guilty, we would undoubtedly be convicted of juvenile delinquency and at the very least put on police parole. Then he showed us a neat budget, his yearly budget. He made us examine it. How much he made a year; just what he did with the money. He wanted us to see if we could figure out where he could squeeze another nine hundred out of his income."

"In those days there was very little leeway in our budget. Nine hundred dollars was a tremendous item."

"Yes. Dave and I studied it hard. I remember it came out exactly even for the year, every cent down for something. Dave asked if that meant that his father worked like a dog all year just to spend every cent he made raising a family."

"There were times when we spent more than he made."

"I couldn't see any way to cut down but Dave thought the insurance payments were too high. He suggested cutting down on insurance. Mr. Collwell flatly declined and pointed out how necessary that insurance would be to a widow left alone with two small children if her breadwinner were suddenly removed. I said I thought my grandfather ought to pay half of it, but Dad said that since my parents were dead and my grandfather had assumed responsibility it would hardly be fair to force this unnecessary expenditure on him. But he taxed us twenty percent of our income for a year and we didn't beef about paying it."

"But your grandfather paid half."

"Yes. Doc Chalmers told him about it and I had to go through

another session with him. He sent me over to deliver his check for four-fifty and after that Dad Collwell had me pay my share of the assessment to grandfather. It sure taught me a few things. Dave worried about it for a while. He said getting married just plain wasn't worth it. You notice he changed his mind though, or Annette changed it for him. That brings us back to Donna. Have you met Sammy Ingram?"

"Sammy Ingram? Isn't she one of the girls at Donna's apartment? I have never met her. Donna likes her."

"So do I. I think Donna has been a little stingy about Sammy. She is a woman it is an honor and a pleasure to know. And the most beautiful one I have ever seen. I had luncheon with her today."

"You wouldn't be trying to make Donna jealous, would you?" Mrs. Collwell's smile was faint but kind.

"No, I wouldn't. I think too much of Donna for tricks and theatricals. I met this girl at their after-Christmas party and admired her very much. Red Islip, the man she is engaged to, was with us. Great guy. Great couple."

"I never heard of him. Donna likes Sammy, I know that."

"Yes. Well, they taught me a few things. Not altogether pleasant, either, but I hope useful. Certainly no boost to my ego. They have been working together for a definite, well-ordered purpose, working for years, sacrificing, waiting, saving money, studying day and night—all to accomplish this set purpose they have agreed on. It struck me that I was being a good deal of a fool, taking Donna's words at their face value and dropping my own cherished plan and purpose. The least I can do is try to discover what prompted the words, and if I can learn that try to find the answer."

"I do not understand it, Mark. Alan and I—we were sure it would always be you and Donna. And that is the way we wanted it. Donna and you."

"Yes. Thanks, Mrs. Collwell. I was sure of that. Well, without saying anything, those two made me feel that I am being no end of

a quitter, just slinking off, washing my hands, trying to wash my heart, of my great ideal, giving up anything as desirable as Donna without putting up a tussle for it."

"I do not know what to say, Mark. There isn't anything I can do. I do not know what has come over Donna. Alan and I were sure—— Why, Donna has always been in love with you! Nobody could doubt that. At least," she added doubtfully, "we always thought so."

"I still think so. And it isn't conceit on my part. She says she does. But she will not marry me. May I ask you a very personal question?"

"Of course, Mark, anything. You know that. But don't ask me to explain Donna. I can't, not even to myself."

"Well, could you tell me this? Is there anything unpleasant in your home life, something that doesn't show on the surface but still is there? Something that might turn a girl against the thought of marriage?"

"Why, Mark! What an idea! I think we have had a particularly happy home life. Oh, I don't mean things have always been sunshine and light. They haven't. We have had our problems and our heartaches. Alan and I used to get on each other's nerves sometimes. We used to quarrel. We don't any more. Now we laugh and make jokes about the very things that used to annoy us. I suppose I was nervous and irritable sometimes; the children bothered me more than they did Alan. He was much more patient. Whatever gave you any such idea?"

"What Donna said, Mrs. Collwell. Oh, not about the family, not about her home! She said she loved me but she knew all about marriage and didn't want any part of it. Love, yes; marriage, no. I thought all she knew about marriage she must have learned right here and I wondered if perhaps she had developed wrong conceptions about things. Sometimes girls get odd ideas. But that is what she said and that is why I am asking you."

"But what did she mean?"

"I don't know. But that is what she said."

"That she knows all about marriage and wants no part of it. That's odd. It took her a long time to reach that conclusion."

"She says it didn't. She says she never intended to marry me, not from the very beginning."

"It isn't like Donna to be timid or shy about—well, what we call the marriage relationship." Mrs. Collwell mused frowningly. "Donna isn't timid."

"It isn't that. At least, she says it isn't. In fact, she quite literally suggested marriage relationship without marriage."

"She what!"

"That's what she said. So, when I decided to try to work the thing out, I thought if we could find out what she has against marriage, we would know where to start to overcome her prejudice."

"That is the strangest thing I ever heard, Mark. I don't know what to make of it. Are you sure you understood her correctly?"

"Yes. Those are her exact words, repeated several times, with increasing determination. Maybe she has picked up some cockeyed notions from all those lousy books and movies where marriage certainly leaves a lot to be desired. But Donna has too much sense, too firm a background, to be thrown off-balance by artificialities cooked up for so-called entertainment. There's too much wholesome realism about Donna for that."

"I never was so surprised in my life, Mark. Alan and I tried to figure it out. We couldn't. I thought maybe she had fallen for somebody in New York but she says she hasn't. Alan thought maybe she had grown overfond of her job but she denies it. And certainly it is not true to Donna's general nature—not as we know it."

"Of course there has been a lot of trouble with these hasty war marriages among our friends. Maybe it frightened her. Or perhaps she was upset about David dying and leaving Annette, so

young, with a baby to raise. But Donna has never seemed timid about anything. I am convinced if we knew what she thinks she knows about marriage, we would have a good starting point."

"Why don't you ask her, Mark?"

"I did. She says she knows *all* about it."

"And wants no part of it?"

"That's right."

"Mark, I wonder if all those girls in that apartment are as nice as Donna seems to think? She must have heard something from somebody, something shocking and disgusting and unbearable."

"She says this is nothing new. And she reminded me that when I talked of marriage and our home together and having children, she kissed me and said nothing. And thinking back over it, I realize it is true. I took her kisses for concurrence. They weren't. They were silencers. She said so herself."

"I am going to ask her about it, Mark. May I tell her you came and talked to me? She really owes it to us, to Alan and me, to clear this up. It is a terrible indictment of our home."

"Don't worry about it, Mrs. Collwell. It probably isn't connected with your home at all. It just seemed to me the most obvious explanation. Perhaps as a child she saw something somewhere that made a ghastly impression on her and she has not been able to outgrow it."

"But she would have told me, Mark! You know how Donna is, how she's always been—so frank, so outspoken, so happy about everything. If she had ever had any horrible experience she would have told me."

"Are you sure, Mrs. Collwell? Sammy Ingram gave me something to think about there. She doesn't think Donna is happy at all; she thinks her gaiety and laughter are clever shields to hide her real feelings and thoughts."

"Why, Mark! How can you say that? Donna has *always* been happy! David's death was the only sorrow she ever had in her life. Everything has been easy for her, easy and happy and safe.

Are—are you sure that is what she said, Mark, Donna, I mean?"

" 'I know all about marriage and I want no part of it,' " he quoted gravely.

"I will ask her, Mark. I have a right to ask her. After all, this is bringing the problem pretty close to home. Too close. I will ask her."

11

DONNA acquiesced cheerfully to her mother's request by telephone that she come home for the night.

"Was little old scaredy-cat Mumsey lonesome up there in the sticks all by herself?" she asked gaily. "Sure, your big strong she-protector will gallop right up and scare away the boogy-boogies. I may have to stay in town over the week end though to catch up, but Dad will be there then to keep you company. I have a nasty little research job on hand and it calls for midnight oil and aspirin. I'll leave early. Want me to bring anything?"

Mrs. Collwell did not want anything, any material thing. But for some reason which she did not understand she felt she must see her daughter alone before her husband returned. The bombshell Mark had tossed her could be tackled more squarely, with less subterfuge, between the two of them alone.

Donna, as good as her word, arrived early and Mrs. Collwell had dinner ready for serving. Donna was chattily gay and as they ate regaled her mother with a merry running account of the girls' doings in the apartment, of staff goings on at the office, but occasionally she studied her surreptitiously with cloudy eyes under lowered lids.

"I think you really have been homesick, Mums," she said suddenly. "I'll be glad when Dad gets Chicago wound up and off his agenda and can give up these long trips. It must be lonesome for you here alone so much. Why don't you go in town with me tomorrow? You can shop and hairdo in the morning and we'll have luncheon together. I'll take the afternoon off and treat you to a movie."

"I'm afraid I am feeling my years," Mrs. Collwell said pleasantly. "My urge for New York has dwindled to the vanishing point. But thanks for the invitation. And one more trip will be Dad's finis with Chicago. He is so delighted his letters remind me of the ones David wrote from college when his fraternity house was quarantined and they couldn't go to classes."

It was when they were having coffee that she looked directly at her daughter, unsmiling, and said gravely, "Donna, I want to ask you a personal question."

Donna's smile remained but tightened on her lips. "Better not," she said lightly. "Personal questions have the earmarks of neighborhood gossips who consider it their duty to spill unpleasant news where it will hurt most."

"Perhaps there is a connection between the two. Mark Banister was here this afternoon."

"Dear me! They'll chuck him out of that podnership if he isn't careful. Today is neither a holiday nor Saturday."

"No. He took the afternoon off and came. He wanted to ask me a personal question. I did not know the answer so I am asking you."

"Mother—" Donna spoke gently—"I know you are a little upset about Mark and me. But I am twenty-four years old. He asked me to marry him. To accept or decline is a matter exclusively up to me."

"That is true, Donna. But the implications of his question are not exclusively up to you because they involve me. He asked me if there was any hidden wrong thing in our home life to prejudice you against marriage. That, you see, brings it directly into the home, the home Alan and I have made for ourselves and for our children."

"Why did he ask a thing like that?"

"Because he wants to know what has turned you against home life. He thinks he has a right to know and I agree with him. He feels, I am afraid rightly, that your deep aversion must have its

roots here. He said you told him you know all about marriage and want no part of it. You see, Donna, I believe in home and family life, I believe in Marriage. If something in my conduct of our home has driven you to the opposite extreme, surely I have a right to try to justify myself, or at least attempt an explanation."

"Mother, believe me, it will be much better to drop the whole thing right here. Mark had no business coming here to bother you with it. I just happen to dislike the idea of spending the rest of my life as somebody's wife, somebody's mother, somebody's housekeeper. O.K.?"

"No, it is not O.K. I seem to be on the defensive. I want to know why."

"Mother, I give you my word, the less we talk about this, the better for all of us. I know what I am doing. You can trust me, can't you?"

"I always have trusted you, Donna. Today I am not so sure."

"All right. Let's leave it there, then. You disapprove of my attitude. You are surprised and disappointed in me. I understand that. Now, can we leave it there?"

"No. Because now I know it is true that your prejudice stems from something in our home life. I never set myself up as a model homemaker, Donna. Perhaps I did not always do the best I could, didn't try hard enough. Many times, I know, I fell far short of my own intentions. And I was often nervous and impatient and irritable. But those things are part of human nature, my nature anyhow. They aren't entirely damnable. You can't damn a whole system just because of one clogged wheel."

Donna smiled at her with sudden warmth. "You had a tougher job than most," she said affectionately. "You not only had to mother David and me, and Mark Banister, but all the rest of our friends as well. Along with half the town's stray dogs and cats for good measure."

"I still want an answer to my question—Mark's question."

"Mother—" there was desperation in Donna's voice—"if you

force me to go into this, you will regret it as long as you live."

"No, I won't, Donna. Because it concerns you. Because it concerns us. I know now that something rather tragic is back of it but certainly I will not regret knowing and doing what I can about it, as much as I would grieve over shunting it aside and washing my hands of it."

"Come into the other room," Donna said harshly. "Let the dishes wait. I could kill Mark Banister for this."

"Why, Donna? Mark has a right to get to the bottom of this. You let him go on loving you for eight years. You encouraged him to love you. Now suddenly you turn quitter. That is not like you, Donna, and it is not just to Mark. And it is unfair to me, because the implication is obvious."

"You won't like it," she said warningly.

"I do not expect to like it. But I do not like the way it stands now, either."

"All right, Mother. You asked for it. Here it is. Do you remember the time, eight, nine years ago, when Dad, our father, was giving that redheaded widow such a merry little run-around? That's your sacred institution of marriage! A home, a wife, children, business—and widow-shopping as a sideline! That is marriage? No, thank you."

"I didn't know you knew about that, Donna," her mother said slowly. "I'm sorry. I tried to keep it from you children. I tried to keep it from everybody."

"I know. It was on the afternoon of my sixteenth birthday that Mark first told me he loved me. I loved him, too. I had always loved him. I was in ecstasy. That night, at the big dance you gave for me at the club, I discovered that my father was indulging in an extramarital affair with the redhead. Well, it didn't cure me of loving Mark. But it cured me of marriage."

"You have always seemed so fond of your father, Donna," she murmured wonderingly.

"Of course I am fond of him. Love dies hard, you know. I

think maybe love is something like marriage. It gets to be a habit. They're both ruts you get yourself into and have the devil's own time getting out. And besides, Mother, I was as disgusted with you as with him."

"Because I had failed to hold him? Let him drift away?"

"That movie stuff!" she said contemptuously. "No. Because you put up with it! For the sake of respectability, for the sake of keeping your nice home and your social security, you smiled through the degradation of it. A divorce would be embarrassing. Your domestic security was more important."

"You're wrong about that, Donna. At least, I think you are wrong; I do not feel very sure of myself right now. But I am sure it wasn't that. It was for the sake of the children, preserving the home, the family. They seemed more important to me than my personal pride."

"The usual alibis, Mother. It all boils down to the same thing."

"I offered Alan a divorce, Donna. If he wanted to marry her, I was perfectly willing to go away and get it quite respectably, but he didn't want to marry her. He wanted to preserve the home, too."

Donna's laugh was bitter. "Um! Quite the family man! Wanted to retain his nice wife, his sweet children, the confidence of his neighbors and have his fun on the side."

"Did you tell David, Donna? Did he know?"

"David! That dear dumb cluck? Of course he didn't know! Of course I didn't tell him!"

"I'm glad of that, Donna. Thank you for that."

"You needn't thank me. I didn't do it for you. I did it for David. He was always nuts about Dad."

"Yes, I know. I was thanking you for my son, not for myself. I wish you had told me, Donna. Why didn't you? Maybe we could have talked it through some way. You were always so frank with me."

"This was something I couldn't be frank about. Besides, I was too ashamed of you."

"Too disgusted with me," her mother reminded her of the former word.

"Well, yes" was the defiant answer.

"I still do not see what I could have done, Donna. I did not know you so much as suspected what was going on. I did not want you to know. Would anybody expect a woman to call her children together and confide that their father was unfaithful and hold a conference as to future procedure? I offered him a divorce. He was sorry, he was ashamed of the whole thing and he was trying to get out of it. I still think the family integrity was more important than my own hurt feelings. And even then I was not quite sure whether my love or my pride suffered more deeply."

"Let's skip it, Mother. It's all over now."

"Oh, no, Donna. It's only beginning. You see, your father and I still believe in marriage, home and family. To us, they really are sacred. We want you to believe in them, in spite of their imperfections."

"Oh, cheer up, Mother," Donna said, with a sorry attempt at lightness. "It isn't so bad. I may very likely get married some time. I really expect to, after I recover from Mark. And it will be a good marriage, too, oh, very good! And I shall be untrue to him just as soon as we leave the altar. Then when he gets bored and begins playing around I shall have the laugh on him. That's why I could never marry Mark. I'll never marry anybody I care anything about. But it will be an eminently good marriage."

"In justice to your father, Donna, I want you to know that he really suffered over it."

"When it was over, you mean. When he was tired of it and the game no longer amused him."

"I think he suffered while it was going on, too. He told me about it, as well as he could, when it was over. He didn't try to

excuse himself, he knew it was inexcusable. But he made me see how gradually, almost unconsciously, he got into it and how he drifted along until he was in too deep; how he tried to get out and couldn't. I could see it from his point of view."

"So can I," said Donna. "I shall understand my husband perfectly—because I shall get there first and know all the answers beforehand."

"Do you mean you think Mark would be untrue to you?"

"I didn't think my father would either!" was the defiant retort.

"I won't say I was happy about it, Donna. I wasn't. I suffered frightfully, in my affections, in my confidence and in my pride. But there were many compensations, Donna—you and David, most of all. But there were others, too. And the quiet happy years we have had together lately, our understanding of each other, Alan and I—they are very compensating."

"Do you mean to tell me that, knowing all you know now, all you went through, you would do the same thing over again?" Donna demanded.

"Why, of course I would! I wouldn't hesitate a minute. The few years of heartache and worry seem almost trivial now, considering all the compensations I had through all the years. Alan is a good man. He has been a good father. He fell short of perfection. Who doesn't? This shock it has been to you, this tragedy for you, is far worse than the hurt to me. This is really terrifying."

"Oh, don't worry, Mother. I'll be all right."

"You don't realize, Donna, that many women make it . . . very easy . . . for men."

"Yes, I do. I'm going to make it easy, too."

"Without regard for the hearts that may be broken, the homes disrupted?"

"If the devoted husbands and fathers do not consider the plight

of their wives and children, why should I? Why should any woman?"

"Have you felt like this since you were sixteen, Donna? That is eight years."

"Yes. As soon as I thought the thing through and made up my mind, I began feeling this way. Oh, I weakened once in a while. I assured myself that Mark was different, he couldn't be that way, just as all fool women have deceived themselves from Eve smack down to Donna. But always, when I began to waver, something else happened to pull me up short and stiffen my backbone."

"You mean your father——" Mrs. Collwell began faintly, with pale lips.

"Oh, no, not Dad. I daresay he has had plenty of other philanderings, too, but I didn't find out about them. Other things, other people, but always leading straight back to marriage—and damning it."

"What things, Donna?"

"You're asking for more? Okay. We won't go into the things we read in the papers, or the polls of marital male fidelity, or the VD record of the late unlamented war. We'll take our evidence from right here at home, our own town, our own friends, my crowd. Take Thelma."

"Yes, take Thelma."

"As nice a kid as ever lived. Dead by suicide at nineteen."

"They say it was accidental, Donna."

"Sure, they say that. I have said it too. Repeatedly. But I know it isn't true. That man she married was so loathsome she couldn't bear the thought of transmitting anything of him to another generation. She told me so herself. Marie wasn't here when Thelma came home and Thelma talked to me. She told me she wanted the baby to die. So one morning she did not wake up and the baby was dead. Exhibit A. Want any more?"

"Yes. I want it all."

"Take Nina and Ray. Now it is Ray and Adelaide, the English girl. But he was in love with the English girl when he came home on his first leave and cooked up the divorce with Nina. But he and Nina had been in love since high school. Now—blown sky-high! Exhibit B. Take Jigger and Miriam. Going in debt every month, having their babies on credit, borrowing right and left, worried to death about bills. And now chucking everything and everybody they care about and going to some wild place somewhere just so they can cut down on the overhead and make both ends meet."

"They are going together though and taking the Jug," her mother reminded her.

"In the old days, they both had good jobs and good homes and plenty of money and weren't worried about anything. Marriage is their deficit. Exhibit C. And take Annette, Annette Collwell."

"Annette!"

"Certainly take Annette! Left a widow at twenty-one with a small son, David's son. Her mother can't support her; her mother isn't able to keep David so Annette can get a job again; and she hasn't enough to live on. What can she do but get married again? Social security. Paul seems a very right guy, but right guys do not always turn out quite so right—not when you are married to them. Exhibit D."

Her mother regarded her curiously. "Yet they all have the courage to try it—all except you, Donna. And yet they seem no braver than you."

"They are not braver than I am. They are more cowardly. Marriage is the established, conventional, highly respected avenue for females. They haven't the courage to take a bypath, so they stick to the hazards of the legal highway. Courage!"

"Do you hate your father, Donna?"

"Of course not! Don't be silly. I think he did a beastly thing. According to the best-established polls, most men do. I daresay Dad is much better than the average, certainly I like him better.

But personally I will take my men outside of matrimony or—not take them at all. I'm not going to be stuck with the decision you had to make eight years ago."

"And made wrongly, you think."

"Perhaps. At least I thought so then. I knew I wouldn't take it and I was shocked that you did. Anyhow, it was your decision and I am glad you are satisfied with it. You preserved the home. You preserved the family. You preserved your marriage. O.K. If it was worth it."

"Yes, it was worth it, Donna. It was very well worth it—except for what it has done to you. I hadn't anticipated that. Now I am not so sure."

12

WHEN Mark reached his office on Friday morning he found a memorandum asking him to call Red Islip and while he waited for the call to be put through he experienced again the sensation of oddly pleasurable anticipation with which he had looked forward to his luncheon appointment with Sammy Ingram. Red on the phone was brisk and businesslike. If possible, he and Sammy particularly wanted Mark to have luncheon with them that day. Mark accepted with gratifying alacrity.

Red explained that Friday was the day he did his "homework," and, if Mark could make it, they would like him to come to his apartment, "a big barn of a thing," he called it, uptown off Broadway. He said he was an extremely good cook and would save time, money and digestions by lunching at home. Mark jotted down the address. Red warned him to take the four flight walk-up at leisure and added, "It's really important to Sammy and me to see you today, Mark. We want to ask your advice about something."

Mark laughed. "I am flattered but not fooled," he said. "First tenet in winning friends and influencing people, eh? Ask their advice about something!"

"It's a good tenet," Red admitted. "I've often used it. But this time it is strictly legit. We are not only going to ask your advice. We have mutually agreed to follow it."

Mark laughed again. "I can imagine how important it is then! If I ever knew two people who could give and take their own advice, it is you and Sammy."

"It's the most important thing in the world to us right now," Red insisted. "One o'clock then. The service will be swift and satisfactory if not entirely elegant."

At five minutes to one Mark was climbing the stairs of the old, four-story residence, now remodeled into inexpensive apartments.

He walked slowly. As he neared the fourth landing, Sammy's soft laughter floated out to him and he smiled. He looked at his watch. "Vulgar to be early, rude to be late," he reminded himself. It lacked but one minute of one.

At sight of Sammy Ingram, involuntarily he stopped short and stared.

Red, in crisp white apron and jaunty chef's cap, waved a spoon in greeting and laughed. "Sure, you were right all the time," he said. "She really is as beautiful as that."

"When I'm away I don't believe it," Mark acknowledged. "I tried to describe her to Mrs. Collwell. I got in head over heels and gave up. How can I convince anybody else when I do not believe it myself?"

At first glance, the living room confirmed Red's description, "a big barn of a place." The room was huge, its hugeness undiminished by the conglomeration of nondescript furnishings. An immense table littered with books and manuscripts; a couch and easy chairs and reading lamps; half a dozen somewhat battered office chairs scattered about; open shelves, many shelves, of books and an impressive steel filing cabinet; a typewriter open on the desk, a page, half-typed, showing on the roller.

"Red's boys' club meets here," Sammy explained. "Sometimes he has evening classes here, too, and rallies and—oh, all sorts of get-togethers. Look at the rest of the apartment."

The rest of the apartment consisted of bedroom and bath and a big kitchen where a small table, drawn up by the windows, was neatly laid for three. Red gestured with his fork to the pigeon-blood vase with its spray of yellow roses.

"Sammy's contribution," he explained. "She said we had to be

extra special today because this is the first time you have been our guest."

Mark flushed pleasurably. "Tenet Number Two. Make people feel important. And it works, brother, it works."

"There's no hypocricy in that tenet," Red argued. "People are important. The trouble is so many of them do not realize it."

"We do not buy flowers for everybody, though, no matter how important they are. Only for those, like you, who are personally important to us."

Red waved them to chairs at the table. "I'm putting everything on at once, so we will not be interrupted once we get started. "Plug in the perc, will you, Sammy? Soup's on."

The luncheon consisted of double toasted-cheese sandwiches with crisp curls of bacon, a tossed green salad in a handsome bowl, pastries, fruit and coffee.

Red, still in chef's cap and apron, paused briefly beside Sammy's chair and touched her hand, lying upturned on the table. Then he sat down and swished open his napkin.

"Don't you ask the blessing?" Mark asked interestedly.

Red hesitated momentarily then answered frankly. "Publicly I do whenever I am asked. Privately I say a silent thanks before each meal and about a thousand odd times a day. I'm a very grateful guy; I've got so much to be grateful for. And I did think thanks. I did it when I touched Sammy."

"Do you mean you disapprove of public blessings?" Mark's interest was that of complete sincerity.

"No, I approve of them. But they make some people feel self-conscious and awkward. And public blessings, like prayers, are spoken half to God and half to the audience. There's a formality about it. When Sammy and I are alone we hold hands for a second and each thinks his private thanks. At least, I think thanks. I do not know what Sammy thinks."

"You never will know," Sammy said. "My private thoughts are strictly private."

"What did you mean when you said you do your homework on Friday?" Mark asked. "Do you mean studying for your classes?"

"Partly. But for the most part I work on my speeches and sermons and map out my program for the next week. I check over my classwork for the next week, too, the classes I am teaching. I do the whole week in advance."

"Do you write your sermons?"

"Sometimes. Just for my own clarification. I do not read them. I've really plugged at extemporaneous speaking which isn't extemporaneous at all because you have it down pat in your mind beforehand. Extemporaneous speaking is just a close co-ordination of mental and vocal processes."

"And you would ask my advice!" Mark scoffed. "But it worked! I'm stuck-up as the dickens about it."

"He doesn't think we mean it," Red explained to Sammy. "Sammy, go ahead. You ask him."

Sammy clasped her hands together, palms upward, on the table and leaned intently toward Mark.

"Mark," she said, and her voice was excitingly breathless, "Red and I got the idea the other day that you think we made a mistake, waiting so long to get married, that we are making a mistake now, waiting another year."

Mark was disconcerted. "I don't remember that we even discussed it," he said.

"We didn't. But Red and I got that impression. Is it correct?"

"I'm—uh—that is——" Mark floundered while Sammy and Red waited silently. "I'm not an extemporaneous speaker," he said defensively. "My mind and my tongue go shooting off in opposite directions."

"No hurry," Red said kindly. "We'll wait till they get back on the same track."

"At first," Mark admitted reluctantly, "just at first I thought you were taking an awful chance, waiting so long. Suppose one of you had changed your mind! So many people do, you know.

But I realized almost at once that was nonsense. You are sure of yourselves. Or maybe it's just that you love each other enough. But I knew there wouldn't be any mind changing."

"So then you decided that we are right to wait?" Sammy prompted gently.

Mark moved uneasily and his brows fretted. "Well, not exactly. I couldn't get it out of my mind. I still can't get rid of the idea. I wake up in a cold sweat thinking about it. My God, suppose something should happen to one of you and after all this love, all this working and waiting, you never should have any marriage at all! Accidents do happen, happen to the best people in the world, too. It puts me in a blue funk just thinking of the possibility."

There was a long stillness in the big kitchen.

"If we knew, all three of us," Red said at last, speaking gravely, "that, as you say, something would happen to Sammy or me inside of a year, you would consider it the greatest pity of all that there had been no marriage?"

"My God, yes!" said Mark. "Wouldn't you?"

Sammy and Red smiled radiantly and nodded approval, one to the other.

"Good," Red said. "Now we're getting somewhere. Sammy and I talked it over. In fact, we've talked about little else. We knew you felt that way. And the more we talked about it the more we wondered what the devil we *are* waiting for. We're both right here. It wouldn't disrupt anything. We spend all our spare time together anyhow."

"It wouldn't even upset our budget," Sammy added. "We know that two cannot live more cheaply than one, but certainly two can live together more cheaply than two apart. It will probably mean money in the bank for us."

"And Sammy could get used to having me around before we buckle down to the church business. Taking on me and a church simultaneously would be quite a chore for the frivolous brat. And

it will probably take at least a year for me to get used to having Beauty in Person around the house day and night."

"It would take me forever," Mark said fervently. "I'd be afraid to draw a full breath for fear it would melt away into thin air and I would find it was all a dream."

"Then you seriously advise us to quit stalling and—well, get ourselves married?" Sammy asked.

"I couldn't advise you," Mark remonstrated. "How could I advise you?"

"You don't have to, Mark," Red said dryly. "You have."

"I only said what I thought," Mark reminded him.

"That's what I mean."

Mark was amused to learn that in the brief forty-eight hours that had elapsed since their former meeting, they had covered the entire subject with characteristic and enthusiastic thoroughness. They had agreed that there was plenty of room for Sammy in Red's big barn of an apartment.

"It isn't very honeymoonish," Red admitted. "But nothing else is available and I have another year's lease on this."

"You'll be surprised how bridalizing a few rugs and curtains are," Sammy commented sagely.

"You can bridalize the bedroom and kitchen all you like," Red told her. "But spare the town hall. Don't forget my hoodlums. They feel at home here. I don't want them to turn self-conscious on me."

"The sooner they get over being self-conscious in the presence of rugs and curtains, the better," Sammy said. "But we'll be gradual about it. I will move in on them doily by doily, as it were."

They had discussed tentative dates.

"The first two weeks in July is the practical solution," Sammy said. "We have already planned to take our vacations then and we always vacation together. By making it July we can incorporate honeymoon and holiday. Besides, June is the bride's month

and I can model enough trousseaux to talk the *couturières* out of my own."

"July!" Mark protested. "Why, July is six months away!"

"Neighbor!" Red, beaming broadly, thrust his big hand across the table for a hearty shake.

Sammy laughed. "Red, don't you try to give Mark the idea that all this procrastination was my idea! Red outlined his program to me and I said all right. But if he had suggested that we elope from college I would have chucked my books at the dean's head and raced Red off the campus."

"It was the war threw us off schedule," Red admitted. "I hadn't counted on that. We'd have been married years ago if they hadn't chucked their war into our applecart."

"We could take the rest of the day off and pop down to Maryland this afternoon. I have the car," Mark suggested hopefully.

The place as well as the time had been discussed. They did not want a wedding but they wanted solemnity, they wanted a background of spiritual quiet.

"Little Church Around the Corner?" Mark hazarded helpfully.

"We spoke of that," Red said. "We do not think so. It has been dramatized too much. Too theatrical. Too much publicity stunting. We're very private."

"You probably will not approve of this, Mark, you're so conventional," Sammy said with some eagerness. "But it keeps bobbing up in my mind and I can't get rid of the idea. In fact, I do not want to get rid of it. It's not a very churchly place. It's small and out-of-the-way and nothing ritualistic about it. I'm speaking of Red's little chapel on the water front. Red has done a swell job there and it means something vital to us. And we do not want an elegant wedding. Just quiet. Solemn."

Red smiled at her. "I knew you had something up your sleeve, Sammy. I've been waiting for you to bring it out. Because every other place I mentioned you had objections to, though I was trying to please you. I thought maybe you wanted to go home."

"No. I've been away too long and all my close relatives and my old friends are gone from there. Somehow I can't see it anywhere but in the little chapel."

"We could dress it up with a lot of flowers and things," Red said, considering it frowningly. "You know what we could do, Sammy? We could have it after our regular service, so our own gang—I mean our congregation—would be there. No invitations, of course. And we wouldn't announce it in advance. After the evening service!" His enthusiasm quickened. "We have bigger and tougher crowds at night. I'll bet some of those mugs never saw a marriage without a shotgun or a cop in attendance. I don't usually believe in Sunday marriages but it would be quite late in the evening and the Sabbath nearly over."

"We don't want a reception," Sammy agreed quickly, "and I had already decided to wear street clothes. My nicest ones, of course. What do you think, Mark?"

"I think," he said deliberately, "that you are the damnedest couple I ever met in my life."

"Does that mean that you approve?" she asked doubtfully.

"I approve on one condition. One condition only," he repeated sternly. "Ostensibly you invited me here today to help you run your lives. I'll settle for running the wedding. I approve, on condition you leave the church decoration entirely in my hands. Every detail of it, down to the last wilted rosebud."

"We do not want waste or extravagance, Mark," Red interposed quickly. "We just want it to look nice. The church is small but it's clean and white. We want it to look nice, not elegant, not elaborate."

"It'll look nice," Mark promised gleefully. "No waste and no extravagance. Ferns and palms can be rented and returned. As for the flowers, I give you my word of honor I will deliver them in person to orphans' homes and hospitals first thing on Monday morning. No, by George, I won't! I'll have them specially arranged and after you sail down the aisle when it is over, I will

have a small bunch of flowers for every woman and child in the audience and a blue cornflower for the lapel of every man. How's that?"

"Mark, that's wonderful!"

"Not bad, not at all bad for a beginner," Red said heartily.

"But could you get those things done on Sunday afternoon, Mark?"

"Listen, how is this?" Mark's enthusiasm was soaring. "How about getting the palms and ferns all set on Saturday afternoon, ready for your Sunday morning service? Nothing bridal about it, no flowers, just the greens and plants. Give the morning parishioners an eyeful."

"That's good," Red assented. "And at the morning service we will announce that we are having a special evening shindig and invite them all back. And some will come."

"Will you be able to preach that day, Red?"

"I have sense enough not to try. I'd probably wind up pronouncing the whole congregation husband and wife or words to that effect. No, I have a pal who will take the morning service—he often helps me out. But I'll be there to steer things along and issue the invitation. And I know a man who will come on from Chicago for the evening service and the ceremony. He's a great guy. He's a sort of relative of mine a mile or so removed and we hit it off very well. Surprisingly well, considering that he's a bishop."

"Are you sure he will come so far in the middle of winter?" Sammy asked.

"Yes," Red said with complete confidence.

"Sure you want to tackle the trimming chore, Mark?"

"Yes," Mark said, with equal firmness. "If that isn't left to me, there'll be no wedding, and you may lay to that. When your bishop hits the line, 'Any objections, or hold your peace,' I'll heckle! I've been wanting to heckle ever since you told me about it. I'll say this couple is unfair to organized friendship."

"O.K., O.K., we're not arguing with you," Red assured him laughingly.

"When?" Mark asked eagerly. "Next Sunday?"

Red laughed again. "This is New York, Mark, and this is Friday. There are formalities to be observed. It'll take a couple of weeks. Not more than three at the very longest. All right with you, Sammy?"

"All right with me, Red," she replied joyously. "Isn't Mark wonderful? Aren't you glad we asked him?"

13

WHEN Alan Collwell reached home at ten o'clock that Friday evening, he sensed from the tightness of his wife's greeting embrace that things were not exactly right and her first words gave disturbing confirmation.

"Alan! I was never so glad to see anybody in my life!"

"That's nice," he said pleasantly, easing himself out of his heavy topcoat. "It would be pretty discouraging to be met with 'You again! Why couldn't it have been anybody else?' "

Jean's only answer was a breath so deeply drawn as to approximate a sigh.

"Donna home?" he asked casually.

"No. She is working this week end. She came up Wednesday."

He followed her into the living room where a cheerful fire blazed cordial comfort. "She's all right, I suppose," he suggested tentatively.

"Yes."

From the thinness of her voice he knew the trouble had to do with Donna.

They seated themselves in easy chairs, facing each other, on opposite sides of the fireplace. Alan lighted his pipe and got it drawing well. He smiled across at his wife and received no brightening acknowledgment.

"It's nearly over, Jean," he said. "It won't be long now until you have to pry me out of the house with a crowbar. We're getting the Chicago office in fine shape. Morgan is a good man.

Taking hold of things just right. Couldn't do better myself. One more trip and Chicago will be off my agenda, thank God. It's a nice town but I never was so glad to get rid of anything in all my life. I'm too old for long-distance commuting. It meant a good deal to us a few years ago, though, didn't it?"

"Yes," she assented. "It was a godsend then. I'm glad it's nearly over. It was your baby but it's a big boy now."

"Yes. And I couldn't leave it in better hands than Morgan's. My report on him is top-notch in every particular."

"That's good. Alan, I have to talk to you—about something unpleasant. About something we agreed never to mention again as long as we live. Now we have to."

"Are you sure we have to talk about it, Jeanie?" he asked quietly.

"Yes."

"All right then. If we must, we must."

"We must, Alan. On account of Donna."

"Donna!"

"Yes. She knows about Magda Long. She calls her the red-headed widow. She found out when she was a child and has brooded about it ever since. That is why she will not marry Mark. She doesn't want anything to do with marriage. I suppose she thinks all men . . . do those things."

"I thought this new generation was sophisticated about sex," he said, speaking carefully and with complete dispassion. "I thought it was their boast that they could take it in their stride."

"Not when it is personal. Not when it is someone they love. About books and plays they are sophisticated enough, but not when it hits home."

"I am surprised at Donna. She has never been the brooding type. Nothing moody or melancholy about her. And she has always been fairminded and unprejudiced."

"Alan, this is a frightful thing to say but—we do not know Donna. I wonder if parents ever know their children. Perhaps

the more conformable they seem, the more they are holding back, keeping hidden. I tell you we don't know Donna."

"Do you mean, Jean, that Donna deliberately came here and said these things to you?"

"No. I asked her. She didn't want to tell me. I made her."

"You made her tell you! You mean you came right out and asked her?"

"Yes. I had to. Alan, it—it has been hell all over again. I thought we were through with that nightmare and here it is back again, worse than ever."

"You'll have to tell me about it, Jeanie. Take it as easily as you can and don't let it upset you. But you'll have to tell me."

Jean visibly braced herself. Her voice, when she spoke was dull and expressionless. "Mark came to see me. When he asked Donna to marry him she said she loved him but would never marry him. She said she knew all about marriage and wanted no part of it. She still wanted to be friends, she wanted to continue as sweethearts, but without marriage. So he asked me if there was any unpleasant hidden thing in our home life to have prejudiced her against marriage."

"He has seen plenty of our home life," Alan said resentfully. "He should have known for himself what our home life has been."

"That's what he thought. He had considered our home life ideal. But he reasoned that anything she knew firsthand about marriage she must have learned here. So he asked me. I couldn't think of anything so I asked Donna."

"I am surprised at Donna," he said, with poorly suppressed anger. "However there is nothing we can do about it. It's her life. If she wants to ruin it, she can. We can't force her into marriage."

"We have to do something, Alan. She has brooded over it so long her feelings have grown all warped. And ugly, Alan, really ugly. She says if that is the way men want life, it is all right with her. She will play it the same way. She—I hate to say this, Alan —she offered to live with Mark without marrying him."

"What!"

"Yes, she did. And that isn't the worst of it," she went on wretchedly. "She says she is going to get married sometime. She is going to marry someone with money and with position, someone she doesn't care about but who can give her things. And she is going to be untrue to him as soon as she leaves the altar. Then when he begins to show interest other places she will have the laugh on him. That is exactly what she said, Alan. And I think she means it."

"She's crazy!" he said explosively. Then he added moodily, "A nice hypocrite she has played it with me all these years."

"With me, too, Alan."

"Only by hiding it from you. But underneath that sweet smile and that soft voice she has been despising me."

"Me too, Alan. Maybe not exactly despising. Disgusted—that was her word. She was disgusted with us."

"But why you, Jeanie, for God's sake? You didn't do anything! Why you?"

"That's what she said. In fact she said she was more disgusted with me than with you. She was ashamed of me."

"Jean, you aren't making sense," he said irritably. "You had nothing to do with it. You were a brick about the whole mess."

"Donna thinks I was common and cheap and grasping. She thinks I put up with the humiliation just for respectability's sake, so people wouldn't talk. And also, of course, to keep my social security, a house to cover me and food to eat. She thinks I swallowed my humiliation and sacrificed my pride for what I could get out of it."

Alan's face, which had gone a sickly gray, darkened with an angry flush.

"She's a fool," he said thickly. "You were magnificent, Jean. I always said so. I'll never forget it."

"Donna was ashamed of me."

"What did she want you to do?" he demanded harshly. "For-

get your children? Break up your home? Drag the family through the divorce courts?"

"She would have had more respect for me. I told her, Alan. I tried to explain it to her. How it happened. How we both, still, believe in the home and love and marriage. I told her I thought it was better to sacrifice my pride and swallow the humiliation than disrupt and wreck all the things we believe in. And what's more," she added with a touch of defiance, "I told her it was worth it, that the compensations more than made atonement! And that I would do the same thing all over again, from our marriage right down to tonight. . . . Only, of course, I did not realize what we had done to Donna."

"What did she say?"

"She said it was all right for those who like it. She doesn't like it."

"Well, there isn't much else you can do," he said heavily.

"There isn't anything else I can do, Alan. It's up to you now."

"Up to me! What can I do? She knows I made a fool of myself. I know it too. But there's nothing I can do about it now."

"Maybe there is, Alan. We must think it over carefully. We have to do something. Don't you see, Alan, that in a sense we are on trial? The children of parents are their judges."

"Children are unfair," he said bitterly. "Inexperienced, headstrong, impractical! Look at the good parents whose children have gone wrong. You can't blame the parents. At least, not always. Sometimes, yes, I grant you, but not always."

"Maybe the children know more about their parents than we outsiders know."

"Jean, you can't universally condemn parents for the way their children turn out. You can't do that! Other elements enter in. And maybe sometimes when it is the parents' fault, they couldn't help themselves. They were caught in currents they couldn't control."

"We are to blame though, Alan. You and I. We should have known there was something behind Donna's happy laughter and gay talk. We should have realized that anyone as intelligent, as clever, as Donna, had more in her mind than idle pleasantries. We are to blame for that."

"She was always so sweet," he said brokenly. "So amiable about everything, so happy about everything!"

"The most impenetrable iron fence in the world! Nobody thought of looking behind it. But we should have thought, Alan. We should have looked. We should have penetrated her barriers."

"But who could be expected to worry about Donna? She had everything she wanted. She loved Mark and Mark loved her. Who could have suspected her of harboring sinister secrets?"

"Alan, do you remember the talk we had together? Years ago. The last time we mentioned this. It was when you had finally broken loose from Magda and you were ashamed and sorry but you were happy, too—because you had cut loose. Do you remember the things you said to me that night?"

"Well, in a way I remember," he said shamefacedly. "I know I meant every word I said. I knew I'd been a damn fool and I felt like the devil about it. You had been an angel to put up with it and see it through and I swore I'd make it up to you. And I have tried to, Jean. I have tried hard."

"And you succeeded, Alan. Until this came up. Now I think you will have to do the same thing for Donna."

"What do you mean?"

"Confide in Donna. Be honest with her. Tell her what you told me."

"Tell Donna! You mean—discuss a thing like this with Donna?"

"You'll have to, won't you? She already knows the fact. So did I. But you made me see the other side of it. I didn't feel good about it, even then. But I quit feeling bitter and resentful. I even

felt sorry for you. And gradually, in time, I got over thinking about it. Say those things to Donna. Make her see it as you made me."

"Jean, you—you're crazy. I can't discuss such things with Donna!"

"You discussed them with me."

"Yes, but you are my wife. Donna—why, Donna is my daughter! I couldn't do it, Jean. I simply couldn't do it. Maybe if she were married it would be different. I might feel easier telling Annette, I do not know. But I couldn't tell Donna. I would rather die than do it. I would rather be dead. Donna has always been such a—such a good child."

There was a long silence between them. Pain scorched their throats. Their lids beat feverishly over their eyes, scalded with unshed tears.

Jean spoke first, spoke quietly.

"Let's not talk about it tonight," she said. "We'll have to think it over."

"Think it over! My God, will I ever think of anything else?"

"I'll make some coffee," she said and went to the kitchen.

Alan sat grim-faced and motionless until she returned with the tray of coffee. For a while they sat in silence.

"Donna is absolutely wrong about this whole thing," he said at last, his voice once more quiet and reasonable.

"Yes, of course, Alan. That is what you must make her see."

His voice went up again. "I can't, Jean! Don't you see I can't? I tell you I'd rather die. I couldn't meet that child's eyes, ever again, as long as I live. I can see them now, so black, so soft. . . ." He shook his head determinedly.

They turned again to their coffee.

"What does she expect anyhow?" he demanded sullenly. "Perfection? Who is perfection? She can't, in common justice, hold that fit of madness against me all my life. Why, God Himself forgives us when we're sorry."

"Maybe that's it, Alan. Maybe she isn't sure you're sorry. If she could see you as I did that night we talked, and as I see you tonight, Alan, then I am sure she would realize how you have regretted it and tried to make it up to me."

"I'd rather be dead, Jean. I tell you, I'd rather be dead."

"And leave Donna holding the bag, Alan? For the rest of her life?"

"Oh, she'll get over it. She's bound to get over it. It's just a childish notion she's clung to too long. She doesn't love Mark enough. That's all. When she is really in love she'll come to her senses."

"She loves him enough for everything except marriage. Don't forget that."

"I can't imagine what's come over her," he said aggrievedly. "She's always been so reasonable about everything."

"Has she? I wonder. Or whether her reasonableness was another facet of her sly defense. Let's go to bed, Alan. We can't do anything about it tonight."

"Are you sure she won't be home this week end? I don't want to see her, not yet. I'll go away somewhere."

"She isn't coming. Haven't you noticed what she has been doing, Alan? Removing herself from us, little by little, more and more. From us and from her friends here. She is establishing herself in New York away from us. Oh, gradually, kindly, she wouldn't hurt us for the world—but her intention is obvious. It is now. God knows I was slow enough seeing through it. Like everything else she has done, she made it all seem so reasonable. Come on. Let's go to bed."

"You go, Jean. I want to sit here alone and curse myself out for a while. I'll sleep better for it. Try not to worry, Jean. It's a ghastly mess. My fault, I know. But we'll pull through. At heart Donna is sound and good. She'll weather this."

"It isn't just a tornado, Alan, a swift, short twister. I wish it were. But Donna's been in stormy seas a long, long time—too

long. She needs a life raft. Good night, Alan. Don't stay up too long. You've had a tough trip."

"And a tougher landing," he said grimly. He stood up and took her arms in his two hands. "Jean, tell me the truth. You said you forgave me completely. Did you? Down in the bottom of your heart, Jean, did you forgive me completely?"

She met his eyes straightly and smiled. "Yes," she said. "And I not only forgave you. I got over letting it hurt me—until this came up."

"Thank you, Jean." He kissed her tenderly. "Jean, did—she tell David?"

"No. Oh, no, Alan. She didn't tell him. She says the poor dumb darling never suspected a thing. She kept it from him."

"Um. I wonder. Good night, Jean. Try not to worry too much. And say your prayers. I'll be up afterwhile."

14

LONG before dawn began graying the sky, Jean Collwell in dressing gown and slippers went softly down the stairs. Lights still burned in the living room. Alan Collwell, fully dressed, slumped inertly in the easy chair, his head resting awkwardly on his right shoulder. Deep, new lines plowed his gray face and even in sleep his heavy brows were rigidly compressed.

Jean stood motionless, regarding him somberly. Forcefully she stilled the involuntary quivering of her lips and repelled the tears that stung her eyes. She went to the kitchen and set about preparations for breakfast.

Aroused by the barely audible evidence of activity, Alan rose wearily and looked about the familiar room with an air of wonderment, as if unexpectedly finding himself in totally strange surroundings. Then his eyes cleared and his shoulders lifted. He went to the kitchen door.

"Pretty irregular hours for old-timers like us, Jean," he said. "I'm afraid you didn't get much sleep."

"And ditto to you. . . . Go and take a bath, Alan. Get into your pajamas and we'll have a spot of breakfast. Do you have to go to the office today?"

"No, thank God. I left the papers at the office last night."

"Good. We'll have some hot cereal and off you go to bed. And what's more, I'm going with you."

"Are you sure Donna will not come today?"

"Yes. She is tied up all day. She'll probably phone later. I'll

put her off if she suggests coming. Coffee is ready, Alan. Would you like a cup before you go up?"

"Yes, please. A hot bath will straighten me out. The house is nice and warm. I forgot the thermostat, didn't I?"

"Good thing you did. Sitting up all night like that! Well, we'll start a brand-new system of our own and call it darkness-saving. That makes it last night instead of this morning."

"Suits me fine. I am not evading this thing, Jean. I'm still bemuddled. I can't think straight. You'll have to be patient with me."

She smiled at him. "I can't tell you how much better I feel since you got home, Alan. I think that is one of the nicest things about a husband. Having someone to shoulder half the worry, leaving only half for me."

"It works just the opposite in pleasure," he said soberly. "Sharing that seems to double it up for everybody."

"Yes. Yes, that is true, Alan. You put that very nicely."

"And so early in the morning, too! Maybe my mind is straightening itself out. I shan't be long, Jean."

The breakfast was a modest one, freshly stewed fruit, oatmeal and cream, and tiny cornmeal biscuits.

"Having everything hot in our tummies should make us even sleepier," Jean explained. "Let's sleep as long as we can, Alan, so the day will be nearly over before we wake up."

He looked at her questioningly. "Do you dread the day so much?"

"No. I do not dread it at all. I shall be relieved to see what comes of it, that's all. But I want us both to be relaxed and ready for it. Not tight and tied-up in knots as we were last night. I do feel better, Alan. And I really think I am beginning to be sleepy."

Without demur from either they went from the breakfast table to bed and almost immediately Jean's tight arm over her husband's shoulder softened its grip and they fell asleep.

Some hours later, the ringing of the telephone extension awak-

ened Jean and she slipped from bed and into the hall and closed the door behind her. She knew it would be Donna.

"Hi, Moms! Prodigal dad get home all right?"

"Yes. And fancy where he is now! In bed and sound asleep."

"Is he sick?"

"Oh, no. I was in bed, too. That must surprise you. He got home very late and we talked and had coffee, so this morning we are sleeping it off. He isn't going to the office."

"Is he getting Chicago out of his hair?"

"Yes. Everything's going just right, better than he expected. One more trip will wind up his connection there. Isn't that grand?"

"Perfect. About time he had a break. Want me to pop home?"

"We weren't expecting you, Donna. We've been making dates. And we're going out to dinner tomorrow so there's no real reason for you to come. I thought you had to work so I went right ahead and made arrangements."

"Yes, really I should work. Have yourselves a good time and let the poor dear sleep his sleep out. See you next week then. Want anything from town, Mother?"

"No, not a thing. Be sure to let me know when you're coming so I can wash up an extra knife and fork."

"Yes, I will. 'By, now."

Very easily done! She had known it would be. Donna always made things easy.

Mark Banister telephoned later. She said she had no news for him—not yet—but she was working on it.

"I'm going to tackle her myself pretty soon," he said, and there was a new ring of assurance in his voice. "Between us, we ought to get somewhere. I am having a grand time with that couple, Sammy Ingram and Red. They are bucking me up no end."

"You mean those friends of Donna's?"

"My friends," he said proudly. "They admit it."

Mrs. Collwell was old-fashioned enough, and maternal enough,

to feel vague regret that a girl, a beautiful girl, was involved in this new friendship but her only comment was "How nice, Mark!"

She busied herself about the house, grateful that there are so blessedly many things about a house to busy one. She cleared away the breakfast dishes and prepared for luncheon, or for a second breakfast as seemed desirable. She laid a fire in the grate ready for lighting. She brought in the mail and the morning papers and put the milk bottles out with a note of instructions. She bathed and dressed, fussing with her hair and her cosmetics, taking unusual pains with her appearance, wondering as she did so why appearance, on this day of all days, seemed so important. She answered the telephone and declined an invitation for family bridge that evening on the plea that Alan had arrived late after a hard trip and was tired out. She realized, almost without thought, that all the hours of this day were too important for idle recreation.

From years of experience she could interpret every sound from upstairs when Alan wakened—the lazy turning in bed, the yawning, stretching, the creak of bedsprings, the running of water. She knew to the minute the time required for shaving, showering, dressing. From the first footfall at the head of the stairs, she knew the exact number of steps to the living-room door. She did not count them. Her numbering was intuitive.

Alan found her in the kitchen again.

"You look better," she said approvingly.

"So do you. Smells like bacon and smells good."

"Yes. I thought since the day has gone so haywire, we'd better start off with breakfast again and have dinner tonight. Donna phoned. She isn't coming. She suggested it but I told her we were loafing the day out and dining somewhere tomorrow. And she really has work to do."

"That's good. That's fine."

So it was not until they had finished their mid-day breakfast,

after he had looked through the accumulation of unimportant mail and she had tidied the dining room and kitchen, that they sat together lookingly soberly at each other from opposite sides of the fireplace.

"Do you remember what I said last night, Jean?" he began.

"Yes. You said you couldn't talk to Donna about it. You said you would rather die than talk to Donna."

"Yes, that's what I said. That's what I meant, Jean. I can't talk to Donna. I suppose I'm a coward but I can't do it. I would never have another moment's happiness, never a moment's unguarded ease, in her presence. I can't do it. But the other I am quite willing to do."

"The other?" she repeated vaguely.

"The alternative. I'd rather die. That's what I will do."

The whitening of her face threw the deftly applied rouge into unpleasant focus but otherwise there was no change in her expression.

"People can't just die when they feel like it," she said tonelessly.

"Oh, yes, they can." His voice was confident. "Certainly they can. I learned something about expiation last night, Jeanie. I had always thought of expiation as a sort of bitter pill, forced on one, swallowed with painful reluctance. But I find there is something strangely comforting in expiation. Last night I was so tied-up in knots I thought I could never relax again as long as I live. But suddenly, when I reached my decision about my expiation, all the knots untied and the tightness let go and I felt quite comfortable and at peace. I went to sleep almost immediately."

Jean did not move, made no answer, but her grave eyes clung to his face. He smiled at her.

"Remember the adage of our youth, 'Chickens come home to roost'? I thought I realized the truth of it years ago, during that time we are speaking of. But now I know it was an error of under-

statement. They should have made it clear to us that they keep on coming home to roost, even unto the third and fourth generations. Like right now."

Still she had no comment.

"When you get used to the idea, you will realize it is a natural," he said kindly. "And the timing is perfect. I have to make a final winding-up trip to Chicago. I have already told them at the office that I am planning to close out my private investments in the Western area, so that will attract no attention. There is plenty to take care of you, Jean, nicely, the rest of your life. I made my will long ago, so nothing will have to be done about that. Again attracting no attention. Thanks to income taxes, our lawyer already knows more about my business than I do and can handle things for you without any complications. There will be no insurance problems because all my present policies are endowment or pay-back life, with no double indemnity for accident. I will maneuver an absolutely authentic fatal accident on my Western trip. Nobody else will be involved. And on the day of the accident, or a day or so before, I will write Donna a letter telling her the things I cannot say to her face. And you may be sure, I will give you full credit, Jeanie, for your steadfast nobility during that crisis. That ought to prove to her that I admit my wrongdoing, that I feel remorse and that I am willing to expiate it as far as I can."

"It is wicked to take life, Alan," she said slowly.

"The law does not say so. Not when it is done as a course of justice. In essence, I am at the bar of judgment. I plead guilty. The law frequently offers alternative penalties, say sixty days or sixty dollars. The malefactor has his choice of penalty. So have I. As I see it, there are alternative penalties in my case; your plan and mine. I choose my own."

"It is a very harsh penalty for—for what you did."

"Not really, Jeanie. Ten years ago I would have had no such choice. I had too much responsibility, too much work to do. I

wasn't ready. Even two years ago I wouldn't have felt free to make this selection. David had died. We did not know how Annette would react to it. And there was David's baby. I had a responsibility there. Now she is marrying again and marrying well. David will have a home and a father. I have already provided for him in my will. And there are very few years left anyhow. I am sixty-five, remember."

"It punishes me, too, Alan. A little more than I deserve, I think."

"Yes, Jeanie. That is the worst of it. But anything that punishes me must punish you. We malefactors always forget that the penalty falls hardest on the innocent, the ones who love us. Maybe that is the penalty for their love."

"I would do it again!" she said, with sudden violence. "Right from the beginning I would do it again. But I would try to do better another time."

"In a way it will not be so bad for you, Jeanie. You are used now to having me away from home a good deal of the time. You will be here to see Donna back in the right groove again. Annette and David will be close. Your friends are here. And it will not be very long. Why, if I dropped dead of heart failure tomorrow afternoon, nobody would think a thing of it. Younger men than I are doing it every day. . . . You don't know of any slick way of inducing heart failure, do you?"

She shook her head. "A doctor might know."

"No. Mustn't ask questions. That's a dead giveaway. I'll think of something."

"Suicide is very cowardly, Alan."

"Yes. I admit that. It is both selfish and cowardly. I suppose I always was a coward. I drift into things and then am too cowardly to cut loose and make a clean hard break. But anyhow, this is much better than the other, your plan. I don't see how it can fail to impress Donna with the sincerity of my remorse. It is the best I can do."

"We do not have to decide now, Alan. There is no hurry. We must think it over very carefully. I am sure we can find another way."

"No hurry at all," he agreed heartily. "But once you get used to the idea, Jeanie, you will see it is foolproof. Cowardly, yes, because I am still trying to save face when it should not matter. But foolproof, because it is bound to work. As I see it, Donna has intrenched herself in the belief that I enjoyed myself while things were going on and was only regretful at being found out. She figured it was the discovery, not the act itself, that caused me anguish. A drastic move like this will awaken her to the realization that I both suffered then and suffer now. It will prove that I, too, realize that the wages of sin have got to be paid and I do not shirk the payment. . . . It's foolproof, Jeanie. . . . By the way, isn't this Saturday afternoon? How about the Sunday marketing?"

"I did it yesterday. I have a little chivvying around to do upstairs."

Jean did many things upstairs. She straightened closets and shelves and drawers. She put her immaculate room to tidier rights. She sorted laundry though it was only Saturday. She stood a long time in Donna's lovely room. It was hard not to feel a great rage against Donna. Donna, at twenty-four, should be more grown-up, should have outlived her childish fancies. But she reminded herself fairly that they had encouraged, had loved, Donna's continuing girlhood, so at variance with her mental alertness and her professional success. Now, it seemed, the only real continuance had been her intensity of prejudice with her glad girlishness to serve as its sheltering mantle.

It was late afternoon when suddenly she straightened, eyes brightening intently, pursed her lips in brief concentrated consideration and then ran lightly downstairs to her husband.

"Alan," she said eagerly, "there is another way. I just thought

of it. There is no reason for you to do that. You can just go away for a while."

He shook his head and smiled at her. "Oh, no," he said, "no running from the law! It'll keep you running the rest of your life. You've got to face it and take your medicine."

"No, but listen, Alan. You won't be running away from anything. You'll just be taking a trip. I will go with you, Alan. We have enough to live on—you said so. You can wind up Chicago and then retire. We'll go together on a long, long trip, a year, two years, three, forever if you like. And when Donna is alone she will just naturally turn to Mark. From force of habit, she will turn to Mark. And you can write your letter to her as soon as we get away. It will be just the same except——"

"Except not so final," he finished the sentence. "Not so final. That is your argument pro and it is mine con. It wouldn't be final. I would still have to come back to it."

"But not for a long time, Alan. She would be over it by that time. She would be married and settled and have more sense. She would have forgotten all about it. You always said we would take a long trip together somewhere when you retire. We will tell her we are taking that trip. Let's go, Alan."

Alan laughed and took her hand, drawing her down into the chair with him. "What a great little argufier you have turned into," he said. "Yes, we did promise ourselves a long trip somewhere. But we planned to go as tourists, not fugitives. As tourists we would have fun. As fugitives we would have worries and heartaches and constant regrets. We might even begin to hate each other."

"Not if we were together, Alan."

"Yes, even if we were together. Maybe more if we were together. We wouldn't know how things were going with Donna, and we know now that she would never tell us. We would be in constant uncertainty and doubt. We would always be thinking

she might need us and we were not here. And I would have it hanging over me, day and night, that unless I kept you enslaved with me away from home, I would still have to come back and face those accusing eyes."

"But they wouldn't be accusing, Alan. Not if she understood and was happy—and gave up her strange ideas."

"But we would never know whether she understood, whether she was happy, whether she had given up her strange ideas."

"Oh, she would tell us, Alan. Her letters would tell us. Once she got rid of—of these terrible thoughts—of course she would tell us."

"She hasn't told us much these last eight years, has she? No, Jeanie, believe me, you will be much happier here. Right here in your own home. Where you can know what comes to Donna and help her as much as possible."

"Alan, I—I feel very angry at Donna. It—it all seems so—so fantastic."

"Yes. It did to me last night. In a way it still does. But that doesn't let me out, Jeanie. It doesn't let either of us out. We fell down on our job, fell badly. We should have been too careful to be fooled by a smile that cloaked a sneer and a smirk."

"Sometimes I have very wicked thoughts, Alan. Not only about this. About other things. Do you remember," she went on, speaking hurriedly, "when it was in the paper three years ago that Magda was very ill in California with pneumonia and recovery was doubtful? Alan, I did not want her to recover. I hoped she wouldn't. If I had dared I would have prayed that she would die."

"Why, Jeanie?" He was surprised and puzzled. "It was all over then. You knew it was all over. She was less than dust to me. She was anathema to me."

"Yes, I know. It was because she *knew*, Alan. I always so hoped nobody knew. Magda and I, of course, but nobody else.

And so—I really hoped she wouldn't keep on living. Then I would be the only one. At least, I thought so then. I didn't know about Donna."

"I'm sorry, Jeanie," he said huskily.

"I suppose I've had a guilty conscience ever since," she said more lightly. "Anyhow I'm glad to get it off my chest. She didn't die and I do not care now."

The week end wore itself away. Jean was shocked and somewhat terrified to discover that, confronted with an upheavel so cataclysmic, there were so few details to be ironed out, so few subjects requiring sustained discussion. Alan reminded her, rather humorously, that it was the philosophical approach to existence: prepare for life but be ready for death. He was gratified to realize that, without having seriously contemplated this eventuality, the general map of his life was in such complete conformity.

The plan, according to his reasoning, was simplicity itself. His affairs were in order. He would go to Chicago a little in advance of schedule but reasonably enough since only final formalities remained to be put in the record. He would ask for a couple of weeks off from the New York office to dispose of his personal holdings in St. Louis and Minneapolis. This, too, was reasonable. Since he would no longer be making his westward treks with such regularity, it was no more than the part of wisdom to liquidate his investments there, especially at this time when liquidations were easy and profitable. From this trip he would not return.

Jean suggested a compromise. Since he objected to what she called a long-promised tourist trip in foreign countries and to which he referred with some hauteur as fleeing from justice, he could write his letter to Donna and then quietly disappear. Not into eternity. Just into open spaces, somewhere comfortable, somewhere safe, alone, without her. He could communicate with her privately. This subterfuge would just as well effect their one set purpose, the salvation of Donna. His disappearance would be

as convincing as his death. She went so far as to plot his logical return after Donna had come to her senses and was happily married. Amnesia. Lots of people did it. And could one question a victim of amnesia?

Alan would have none of her compromises. "You mean I am just to vanish somewhere all by myself and not see you any more? And not come home?"

"But not forever, Alan. Just till Donna is straightened out."

"I'd rather be dead," he said flatly. "Believe me, Jeanie, I'm giving myself the easiest out on this. What would I do with myself, sticking it out in strange places among strange people without you? I would be bored stiff. I'd rather be dead. Besides," he argued more logically, "a mere disappearance would necessitate investigations, police inquiries, search for a missing body. The company would not like that. Neither would I. Besides, suppose they found me. What could I say then?"

Having committed himself to a line of procedure so entirely alien both to his own nature and to all his preconceived ideas of correct behavior, Alan took a certain satisfaction in working out minor details, polishing up fine points, perfecting his plan.

"I never set myself up as a perfectionist before," he said, with an odd admixture of humility and pride, "but this is going to be the perfect suicide. Nobody but you and Donna will ever know. And if this doesn't jolt her back into her senses, nothing ever will."

As if it were a new game, he toyed with it constantly, fitting small pieces together, rubbing off rough edges, and in spite of the underlying sadness there was humor in the doggedness with which he worked at it.

Jean complained once that he actually seemed to look forward to the status of being dead and he admitted that it compared favorably with other eventualities he could mention.

"I never thought much about being actually dead before," he said interestedly, "and it is not as formidable a prospect as I

would have anticipated. . . . It will certainly set Donna back on her feet."

"You will not be here to see it," she reminded him.

"No. Not here. But I shall be aware of it."

Jean offered no further protestations but her eyes were moody and reflective. Often she stopped abruptly in what she was doing, hands motionless, lips tight, eyes veiled behind grimly lowering lids.

"You will be in Chicago several days," she said at last. "And then you will be in those other towns quite a while, too. St. Louis and Minneapolis. Alan, is there any reason why, during all those days, I should be kept here in constant expectation of bad news? Do I have to anticipate it every hour of every day? Won't you try to make it easy for me?"

"This sort of thing cannot be made very easy, Jean," he said. "But I will do the best I can. What have you in mind?"

"Keep in touch with me. Phone me. You often call me long distance, so no one would think anything of that. Phone me three times. So I do not have to watch the clock every minute and my heart will not stop beating every time the doorbell rings, phone me at least three times. Then I will not have to begin counting minutes until after the third call. If it takes longer to dispose of the property than you think, phone oftener. You can tip me off without giving anything away. Just say, 'I will phone again in a few days.' That way I will not have to be watching the clock every minute of every day while you are gone. That is only fair, Alan."

"Yes, that is only fair, Jean. And I promise. It may take quite a while, getting things wound up properly and there is no use keeping you in suspense unnecessarily."

"Mark is going to have it out with Donna," she said. "Maybe he can bring her to her senses. Realization of love, the sacredness of love, that is all she needs. Maybe he will break down and make such violent love to her that she will realize how immense and sometimes uncontrollable love is."

"I can't imagine Mark being very violent," Alan said dryly. "And after what's been going on for eight years, I can't imagine Donna falling for it, either."

"Mark is changed somehow," Jean said. "I don't know just what it is, I can't put my finger on it, but he is changed. I think that Sammy Ingram has something to do with it. She and that man . . . Alan, you remember I told you that sometimes I have very wicked ideas. Well, I think if Mark—well, if he really hurt her, if he attacked her, if he did something really brutal to her, maybe it would teach her something about the terrific ferocity of human feelings."

"I wouldn't count on it," he said soothingly. "But don't begin worrying as soon as I go, Jeanie. I'll keep in touch with you. I'm not going to be in any hurry about this thing. It's got to be done right. I will phone you at least three times. I do not know when it will be, where it will be or how it will be. I don't care. But you'll see in the end, Jean, that I am right about it. And when I get the nice green go-ahead, I'll be ready for it."

"It will all take time, Alan. Remember your promise. Three times, at least three times, you will phone me."

"I may make it four to get my money's worth," he said good-naturedly. "You have a very nice telephone voice, Jeanie."

15

DONNA telephoned her mother on Wednesday.

"What's the big idea?" she demanded, with well-simulated indignation. "I just phoned Dad's office to ask him to pay for my luncheon and they say he has gone back to Chicago."

"Yes, he left last night."

"Why didn't he call me?"

"Didn't he call you, Donna? Maybe he hadn't time. He thought as long as he had this last trip ahead of him he would rather go right away and get it over with. The papers were ready for signing, so he took them and went."

"When is he coming back?"

"I don't know. It will not take long in Chicago. But he took time off and is going to Minneapolis and St. Louis to try to get rid of the investments he has there, since he will not be commuting any longer. A couple of weeks, I suppose."

"Want me to pop up tonight, Mother?"

"I always like having you, Donna, but it seems a tedious trip for so few hours. He didn't leave until last night so I'm not lonesome yet. Come whenever you feel like it, but the trip for one night is rather tough, especially when you are so comfortable in town."

"Sure you're all right?"

"Yes, of course. We had a quiet week end, a lot of talk and too much to eat as usual."

"How is he feeling?"

"He was tired when he got home but he gave himself a lot of rest over the week end."

"Well, if you're sure you're all right I think I'll wait till Saturday. Any time you want me, just give me a buzz. And whenever you feel like a splurge among the neons, it's on me."

"I'll remember, Donna. Take care of yourself."

She repressed the almost overpowering urge to tell Donna to come at once, come quickly. There was no hurry, she knew, but she felt hurried. The talking could wait, though her excited thoughts set her lips trembling. Donna must come in her own good time.

As it happened, Donna did not come until Sunday. She was invited to what she described by telephone as a very special, important party that Saturday night, one she couldn't afford to miss, and it would take most of Saturday to get herself properly beautified. Her mother understood perfectly. She hoped Donna would have a wonderful time at the party. Yes, Dad had telephoned. As far as he was concerned, Chicago was now at the bottom of Lake Michigan. Now only Minneapolis and St. Louis remained to be wiped from his personal slate.

It was late Sunday morning when Donna reached home. She was surprised to find that her mother had gone to church. Usually this did not happen on mornings when Donna came. But a note on the hall table was sufficient explanation. Dr. Orian was guest-preaching that morning. Dr. Orian had been a former pastor of theirs, a favorite with both her parents. It was Dr. Orian, Donna remembered, who had christened her and David. Natural enough to go to church that morning.

The very naturalness of it was a relief to Donna. She had feared her mother might be indulging in a mood of melancholia, perhaps sulking or resentful, after the passionate scene between them on her last visit. To Donna, all her home comings now were visits. In all her twenty-four years, there had been no other such distressful discussion and she had not looked forward to returning with any pleasurable anticipation. Well, her mother had forced it upon her, and Donna congratulated herself that, though most

unpleasantly, she had closed that subject of conversation forever.

She walked through the rooms, humming cheerfully. Deftly she arranged in appropriate vases the flowers she had brought. She opened the box of candy and heaped a tray with fresh fruit. Since she was at home, her thoughts turned to Mark Banister, who, all her life, had been so much a part of the household. Once she went to the telephone and lifted the receiver, intending to call him. But she did not dial. She had made what overtures she could. The next move must come from Mark.

To Donna, the aftermath of her unprecedented scene with her mother was surprising and, to a degree, pleasurable. Though she had wanted her secret to remain buried and its disclosure had been forced upon her, and though she regretted the harshness of her accusations, her general feeling was one of profound relief. A heavy burden had been lightened. A secret cache had been relieved of cumbersome, unwanted storage.

Her mood had changed, too. Small things, hitherto ignored or smilingly passed by, irritated her. She showed impatience, both in the apartment and at the office.

At the office her small outbursts met with good-natured chaffing. "Be careful, Donna. The old maid in you is hot in your footsteps. You'd better advertise for a boy friend."

At the apartment, the girls, though puzzled, practiced their policy of minding their own business. But they had their surmises. Love trouble, most likely, or maybe a setback in business. They were a little shy with her, reserved, considerate. Donna, with her smile off, was almost a stranger.

The surprising feature of it was that Donna wanted Mark, surprising to Donna, that is. No one else knew of it and Donna herself resented it. What good was Mark to her? Mark, who would have none of her boundless love without ignominious fetters of wedlock! Still, being in the main an honest soul, Donna knew she wanted him.

She was further relieved when at last her mother came, smil-

ing, warmly affectionate as always, pleased with the flowers, the candy and fruit. Obviously she was harboring no resentment. Together they prepared and ate their mid-day meal, chatting unaffectedly of various friends and their domestic and social activities. Donna told about the party the night before, the party of importance.

"I was the only insignificant person present," she said triumphantly. "I can't imagine how I ever got myself invited. All the others were high-uppy-ups in radio."

They, too, were sitting on opposite sides of the fireplace when Jean said pleasantly, "Donna, there is something I think I should tell you."

Donna's eyes went black and her lips tightened. There was warning in the look she gave her mother. "Things people think they should tell are usually better left unsaid. Is this something you *want* to tell me?"

"I can't say I really want to," Jean admitted. Then her chin lifted and she said with dignity, "It is something I am going to tell you, even though I am betraying a confidence in doing so."

"Okay, Mother. It's your party."

"It's about your father and Magda Long," Jean said bravely. "When it was all over, he talked to me about it and——"

"I'm not interested in the lurid details, Mother," Donna interrupted coldly.

"No, of course not. I do not know the lurid details. I would not broadcast them if I did. He talked to me and made me see things differently. From his point of view. I wanted him to tell you the same things he told me——"

"The salient fact seems to cover the situation."

"No, it doesn't. It only covers the facts, not the feelings, the emotions. They are important, too. When Alan told me about it, I was still ashamed of him, I was disappointed in him, and I was hurt too, bitterly hurt. But after he told me, I felt sorry for him.

I could almost see how he had drifted into it and how hard it was to get out of it and especially how heartsick he was about the whole business. I felt sorry for him. I wanted him to tell you the same things and he wouldn't."

"He could hardly expect me to adopt such a maternalistic attitude toward him."

"No, that's right. I hadn't thought of it that way. I suppose that's what he meant."

"What he meant about what?"

"When he said he couldn't talk to you. He said you would never understand it, he couldn't make you understand it. He said he would rather be dead. So he's going to do that instead."

"You are not very coherent, Mother. But one thing seems quite clear. Dad and I agree that there's no point in discussing it. Shall we drop it there?"

"We can't drop it. There'll be the funeral to take care of. And the letter he is going to write you."

"I hope you know what you are talking about. I don't. And I'm not interested, either."

"I told you, Donna! He said he would rather be dead than try to make you understand it. I see now that he was right. He could never make you understand. So he went West on this last trip and is going to write you a letter about it and then have an accidental death of some kind. When they find the body—it may be some time if it is by drowning, though I don't see how he could arrange that very well in the middle of winter—but there will have to be a funeral."

A look of intense distaste swept Donna's face. "Mother, I am surprised at you. I hope you didn't confide this cock-and-bull scheme to Dad. He would think you have lost your mind. I almost think so myself."

"It isn't my scheme, Donna. It is his. I tried to talk him out of it. I tried to think up other plans but he said nothing else would

work. He said he would rather be dead than discuss it with you. So he is going to be dead."

"You mean you actually roped him into this thing, too?"

"But I didn't. You can't blame me for this, Donna. I wanted him to resign; he says we have plenty to live on. I said we would go together to some foreign country and live there and leave you perfectly free and independent here by yourself and——"

"Oh, the U. S. A. is big enough for the three of us! And I am free and independent now, thank you."

"Yes, you are. But we are not, because we are your parents. Anyhow, he said it wouldn't work. He said this plan came to him in the middle of the night. He called it an inspiration. There's plenty for me to live on and there is no accident insurance involved, so we will not be cheating anybody. All his papers are in Burgin's hands, so there will be no complication about anything. And he has already made provision for little Davie."

"Mother, I was sorry afterward that I was so insulting to you the other night. I thought I had said too much. Now I know I didn't say enough. This is the shoddiest, cheapest, filthiest trick I ever heard of anyone trying to pull. And I do not believe you ever talked Dad into it, either. He has too much sense. You're just using his absence to try to put one over on me. Well, you're not succeeding, I assure you."

"No, really, Donna. I am just warning you so it will not be too much of a shock when it happens. Dad sat up all Friday night and figured it out. He told me at breakfast on Saturday."

"You mean to tell me that you and my father plotted this ghastly hoax as long ago as last Saturday and—never said a word to me—and let me go ahead——"

"Donna, that's the whole point! He wouldn't see you. He wouldn't talk to you. That's why I put you off from coming Sunday—he told me to. That's why he didn't call you."

"I don't believe you."

"Well, that's all right, Donna. Perhaps I shouldn't have mentioned it. I know he didn't expect me to. But it seemed fairer——"

"Shouldn't have mentioned it! Shouldn't have mentioned it! My father is going to commit suicide and you shouldn't have mentioned it! Not that I believe a word of it."

"It seemed fairer to me but perhaps I was wrong again," Jean admitted quietly. "I thought you ought to be a little prepared for it, before it happens. There will be no scandal about it and it will not hurt the company in any way. He's going to make it look absolutely accidental. But since he is going to tell you in the letter I thought it would be kinder to let you get used to it—well—more gradually——"

"Oh, yes. Yes, of course. That's just the sort of thing one gets used to gradually! Your father is going to kill himself so you get used to it gradually while you wait for it to happen. . . . Mother, if you are lying to me, I—think—I'll—kill—you."

"In some ways you are like your father, Donna. You both think of death the first thing. I never do. I thought of everything else but not that."

"Do you mean to tell me, Mother, can you sit there and look me in the face and tell me that you and my father sat here for—for three days—and figured out how he could kill himself—and make a fool of me?"

"Oh, no, Donna. Not that at all. He said he was sure that his letter, and then his dying right away, would convince you that he realizes he made a fool of himself and that he is bitterly remorseful and willing to make what restitution he can. Expiation. That is what he called it. It wasn't to make a fool of you. It won't embarrass you at all. Nobody in the world will know a thing about it. Dad's very careful about working out details."

"When, if you're not lying, is he planning to do this—this asinine thing?"

"He wouldn't tell me. He wouldn't tell me where either, nor how he is going to do it. I think he thought I could act more surprised if I did not know the details."

Donna stood up, slim and straight, very tense. "Mother, I—don't believe a word of it but I think the very idea is the most hateful, the most damnable thing I ever heard of and if I never hated you before in my life, I am not sure but I do now. I could almost——No, I won't say that again!"

She stormed upstairs and slammed the door of her room. Roughly she rearranged the articles on her dressing table, jerked at chairs, threw cushions. She snatched up a crystal vase from the desk and smashed it to the floor. She stared down at it, unseeingly, for a long instant and then kicked the pieces aside with one small foot. But she could not stay.

She went downstairs again, not stormingly, but slowly almost noiselessly. Her mother had not moved in her chair, had not changed the position of a hand, a finger.

"I want a drink," Donna said harshly and marched to the sideboard. "Have one?"

"Sherry, please."

Donna filled two glasses and handed one to her mother. The wine spilled on her mother's dress from the shaking glass in Donna's hand.

"Mother, does Mark Banister know about this?"

"Donna, you don't seem to get the point at all. Of course he doesn't know. You can't go around telling outsiders anything as personal and private as this!"

Donna sat down heavily. Sherry sloshed on her dress, too.

"Mother," she said, "what did you do the rest of the week end?"

"We talked a good deal. I kept trying to think of something else he could do but he wouldn't be satisfied. He's quite stubborn about some things, you know. He fussed with his papers part of the time, though everything is in perfect order. I tidied up the

drawers and cupboards. At night we had the radio on and played pinochle."

"You played—you played pinochle with a husband who—was going to kill himself?"

"He wanted to. There was nothing else to do."

"Mother, will you give me your word of honor you are not lying?"

"I give you my word of honor that I'm telling you the exact truth and using the exact words as nearly as I can remember."

"It seems to me that for such a devoted wife—and nobody can deny your devotion after all you put up with—it seems to me that for such a devoted wife, over one short week end you were very easily reconciled to the idea of your husband removing himself from our sphere."

"No, I wasn't exactly reconciled. I tried to think of something else. When he flatly refused to go away with me on a long trip abroad, I suggested that he just disappear out West somewhere, all by himself. I said he could come back when it was over and pretend he had amnesia."

"What was his objection to that?"

"He said he would be bored stiff, hiding out somewhere all by himself. He said he would rather be dead."

"He would rather be dead than bored stiff."

"That's what he said, Donna."

"And so you just fell in with his silly plan that because he had made a fool of himself he should go off and accidentally commit suicide. That is hard to understand."

"Donna, that's a little hard for me to understand, too. But in the first place, I couldn't help myself. He had made up his mind. Do you suppose, Donna, that maybe deep in my heart I didn't quite forgive him, after all? Maybe I feel as you do, that I made it too easy for him, that he wasn't punished enough, that he ought to suffer a little more."

"But not death, Mother! Not for that. Why, there wouldn't be any men left at all! You wouldn't want him to die for it!"

"Oh, no, I didn't. But I couldn't talk him out of it."

"Why didn't you have me come home and talk him out of this —this obsession?"

"Donna, really, you don't seem to get the point at all. He wouldn't talk to you. He wouldn't see you. . . . It's your eyes, Donna."

"My eyes!"

"Yes. He said he couldn't meet them. He said he could never meet them again if such words passed between you. He has always loved your eyes, you know. I can't remember his exact words. Innocent, he called them, and sweet. Oh, yes—and good. Such good eyes——"

"Mother, shut up! For God's sake, shut up!"

"You asked me, Donna" was the gently defensive answer.

Donna went upstairs again and carefully picked up, with her fingers, the bits of shattered crystal. Tiny droplets of blood stained two fingers. Donna regarded them with frowning puzzlement as if she had never seen blood before. Holding those fingers apart, separate from the others, she went downstairs again.

"Now listen, Mother," she said. "I am going to believe you. But only because I have always believed you. But since you believe in speaking unpleasant truths, let me tell you this. If you are lying, if this is a hoax, I will never forgive you as long as I live. I will never enter this house again. I will never speak to you again. But until I find out, I'm going to believe you. If Dad thought this thing up, he is crazy. He's out of his mind. We'll get in touch with him first thing tomorrow. If he refuses to come home, we'll notify the police. We'll have them take him in custody. If I have to swear out a warrant against him, I will. And don't think I'm afraid of scandal and publicity. I'm not. If he refuses to come willingly, we'll have him brought."

"We have to be careful, Donna," her mother said uneasily. "I

know he didn't expect me to tell you. Perhaps I was wrong about that. If he finds out you know about this, he's very apt to go right ahead and do it immediately. He's quite impulsive sometimes. We ought to let him have all the time he has left."

"I don't understand you, Mother. I suppose perhaps I never did. The whole thing is, we've got to get hold of him, and quickly, before he has a chance to do anything. Now how can we locate him?"

"I'm not sure we can locate him, Donna. He phoned me Friday. He planned to leave Chicago last night, I think."

"Where was he going?"

"To Minneapolis and St. Louis."

"But which, Mother, which? They are in opposite directions!"

"He was going to both places."

"Where was he going first?"

"He didn't say, Donna. I don't know."

"Where was he going to stop? What hotel?"

"I don't know, Donna. I doubt if he had reservations. Some hotel, of course. Maybe he will phone me."

"That's right, Mother. Maybe he will. He nearly always does, doesn't he? Mother, how could you ever give in to such a mad idea? Couldn't you see he was out of his mind?"

"He didn't seem to be, Donna. He made it seem rather reasonable, although I was entirely against it. He is sixty-five, you know. He said he wouldn't live much longer anyhow. He said it was just like a criminal—no, a malefactor, that's the word he used—a malefactor with alternative sentences: sixty dollars or sixty days. He used that as an illustration. He said he was exercising his constitutional right to choose his alternative and he chose this. There was nothing I could do about it."

"You could have phoned me."

"Oh, no, Donna. That's just what he didn't want. He said if you came home unexpectedly he would sneak out the back way and duck off somewhere."

"Now, Mother, if he calls up, you tell him to come home. Tell him to come right straight home. Tell him I'll marry Mark. Tell him I'll marry anybody he picks out. Tell him I'm going to keep house and scrub and cook and have a baby every six months or so and——That ought to bring him to his senses!"

"It wouldn't be any inducement at all. He doesn't want that. I don't want it. We don't care whether you marry Mark or whether you ever marry anybody. We just want you to believe that, in spite of all the mistakes we made, we think that marriage and home and family are the greatest and most important things in the world. They shouldn't be condemned just because of the mistakes of a couple of fools like Alan and me. With all our mistakes, we still believe in them."

"All right, all right! I'll believe in them. I do believe in them. God knows there must be something in them to make a nice sane guy like Dad do a thing like this—if you didn't put him up to it! All right, I believe in them! I'll practice them. I'll do anything. Tell him so and make him come home."

"It isn't as simple as that, Donna," her mother said sadly. "You can't just say you're going to believe in something and then go ahead and do it. To believe in something you've got to have faith in it and you can't force faith where you haven't got it. It isn't simple about Dad, either. Maybe we can't find him. And maybe he won't come if we do."

"Well, let's get busy. This is Sunday. What can we do today?"

"Nothing. The Chicago office is closed."

"Why didn't you make me come yesterday? What did I care for their damn silly party? They only invited me by accident anyhow. Did he stay at the Prince of Orange in Chicago?"

"I suppose so. He always does."

Donna put through a call to the Prince of Orange in Chicago and eventually got the room clerk. Mr. Collwell had checked out on Saturday afternoon. The only forwarding address he had left

for mail was his home in New Jersey. He had not mentioned where he was going and had made no future reservation.

"Can you think of anything else we could do?" Donna asked despairingly.

"We can't do anything on Sunday. And we don't even know where he was going. We'll have to wait until tomorrow. Would you like a game of pinochle or something?"

"No!" Donna shouted it at her. After a moment she asked curiously, "Who won over the week end, Mother?"

"He did. It cost me forty-seven cents."

"Wasn't he—off his game at all?"

"Not a bit. And neither was I. He nearly always beats me."

16

DONNA was at the telephone at eight-thirty on Monday morning. She called her office and reported that she was at home in New Jersey and would not be in for several days. In response to a polite inquiry as to her health she said crisply, "They haven't diagnosed me yet but they suspect a nervous breakdown and I agree with them. I'll keep you posted as to my demise."

She called the apartment and talked to Sammy Ingram.

"Sammy? . . . Donna. I won't be in for a few days, Sammy. I'm at home with Mother. Don't bother about any phone calls but if a letter comes from my father somewhere out West, get in touch with me immediately. I'll come for it. And Sammy, call a conference with the girls and pick out my successor. I'm moving out."

"I'm sorry, Donna. The girls will be sorry. I hope everything is all right."

"Oh, sure, sure. I'm just going to stay home for a while and take care of my idiots of parents. They can't be trusted alone. Everything's all right."

"All right, Donna. And, Donna——"

"Sorry, Sammy. I can't hold the line up. We're expecting an important long-distance call. I'll take care of my share of the bills till you agree on someone else. 'By now."

At nine o'clock she telephoned her father's New York office and talked to his secretary, who reported that they had received a wire from Mr. Collwell on Saturday, stating that the Chicago

business had been satisfactorily concluded and he was forwarding the papers via air. She promised to telephone his home immediately if any further word came from him. With a slight tincture of surprise in her carefully modulated voice, as became the secretariat, she agreed that if by chance he should telephone the office, which was not expected, she would relay the message that he should telephone his home in New Jersey without an instant's delay.

"I hope nobody is sick, Donna," she said. "He will be sure to ask."

"Tell him you do not know," Donna said curtly. "It's a surprise."

She awaited the postman with feverish impatience, hoping for news yet dreading receipt of the fatal letter.

"Is he going to send the letter before—or after?" she asked her mother.

"He said he might write it the day of the accident, or maybe a day or so before. I asked if he was going to leave it for someone else to mail and he said that would attract too much attention. He was going to mail it himself. So it would have to be before."

"You're sure he didn't leave it with you to hand over to me afterward?" Donna said keenly.

"No. He didn't write it here. I was rather hoping he would. I thought maybe I could remind him of a few points if he overlooked anything. I remember so well what he told me."

Donna raised her eyes despairingly. "You make it sound like a grocery order," she said bitterly. "What are the names of the hotels where he has stayed before—in those other towns, Minneapolis and St. Louis? We could wire him there."

"I don't remember the names, Donna. He stayed at so many hotels. And he didn't go there very often and never stayed long."

"What are the names of the people he did business with? What companies?"

"I really don't know, Donna. He just said he had bought shares

in something, or stock. I suppose he mentioned names but I really don't remember. I know it was wheat in Minnesota."

"Could we wire the police departments in those cities to check the hotels and find where he is registered? The police do that sort of thing."

"Only when they are looking for criminals, Donna. We couldn't put your father in that position."

"I know!" Donna exclaimed triumphantly. "I'll call the Chicago office. He will have told them where he was going."

She lost no time putting through the call. The Chicago office was communicative and courteous but unhelpful. On Friday night the office force had given him an elaborate farewell dinner party and presented him with a finely fitted, cowhide traveling bag, with matching brief case and wallet. He had been greatly pleased and made a fine speech of acceptance and farewell. The papers had been signed on Saturday morning and he had entertained the officials at a very nice luncheon which lasted until three in the afternoon. He had given the New York office as a forwarding address for mail and had made no mention of returning to the city. Certainly if they received word from him they would tell him to contact his home immediately, or if they had other notification of his immediate whereabouts would notify his home by telephone.

"Do we know anybody out there, any friends or business associates, anybody who might possibly see him?" Donna wanted to know.

"I can't think of anyone. Dad knows quite a lot of people, of course, but I have never been there myself. I can't think of anyone."

"How about Burgin? If Dad is dickering about stocks and things out there Burgin should be in touch with him, shouldn't he?"

"I really don't know, Donna. He may."

Donna called the lawyer's office and explained, at painful length, that for a purely personal reason, concerning herself alone,

it was important that she get in touch with her father at the earliest possible moment. Did Mr. Burgin happen to know the details of this Western trip?

Yes, Burgin said expansively, he knew all about this trip, the wind-up trip to Chicago. Mr. Collwell had been in his office on Monday, pleased as a child with a new toy, couldn't talk of anything else but getting rid of his Chicago white elephant. He had taken the Western deeds and contracts along in case he found a good opportunity to dispose of them. He had also suggested that with the present favorable market, it might be wise to dispose of some of his stock in New York and had given Burgin power of attorney to act for him at his discretion in case such favorable break should occur during his absence.

Burgin would be happy to inform her immediately if he heard from her father and would most certainly ask him to contact his home immediately in case he should telephone him. This however he did not expect. After all, why should he telephone Burgin when he had given him power of attorney to act for him at his own discretion?

"Think of something else, Mother," Donna begged despairingly. "There must be something we can do. There must be something!"

"We'll have to wait till he calls us, Donna," Jean said.

"I haven't entirely believed you, Mother," Donna confessed. "Not entirely. But his giving Burgin power of attorney was odd. He never did that before, did he? I suppose he could be pulling a fast one on both of us . . . if all this really was his idea in the first place, as you insist. . . . He could write me the letter, implying suicide—and then, a walkout powder. Maybe another redhead."

"You really have lost faith in us, haven't you, Donna?" her mother mused, wonderingly. "Your father was right. He could never have convinced you any other way. Even yet you do not trust us."

Donna flushed. "I don't really think so, Mother," she dis-

claimed quickly. "But don't you think it's odd, the power of attorney business?"

"Not at all. It's just to make things easy for me, so Burgin can handle things without bothering me with every minor detail. Dad always tries to make things easy for me."

The mail brought a letter to Jean from Alan, postmarked Chicoga, dated Saturday. Donna waited, motionless, hardly breathing, while her mother read it. She passed it to her daughter without comment.

It was an ordinary letter, the kind he always wrote. It expressed infinite relief and pleasure at the winding up of Chicago and recounted details of the office party tendered him with descriptions of his handsome gifts. It said he was entertaining the Chicago officials at luncheon on that same day, Saturday, after which he would be off to the hinterlands for a little private fun and business. He hoped everything was going well at home and that Jean and Donna were well. It ended with the habitual love and kisses.

Donna read it twice.

"There is nothing in this to indicate any dastardly deed in the making," she said defensively.

"Of course not" was the quiet answer. "It is always the most secret document that falls into foreign hands. Alan is much too clever to put private things on paper."

"You speak as if you actually admire him for doing this!" Donna accused her.

"No, I don't admire him for doing it. But if he is going to do it, I admire him for doing it well. Even when I don't approve of what Alan does, I can always count on him to handle it very correctly."

Whenever the telephone rang, Donna leaped to answer it, her heart in her throat. Always the calls were casual ones, of social intent. Always Donna cut them short with the crisp announcement that she had to keep the line open for an important long-distance call.

It was well along in the middle of a dragging afternoon when she said hesitantly, "Do you think it would be all right to ask Mark to come up tonight? I'm going crazy, waiting around like this."

"I think it would be very nice. Ask him to come to dinner. You know, really, Donna, it would be much better if you went right ahead working, going to the office every day. Waiting gets on the nerves terribly and nothing may happen for a week or so."

"And leave you to answer the phone when he calls! Oh, no! You'd tell him everything is going fine and we're both well and let him go right ahead as planned. No, thanks! I'm going to answer that phone!"

Mark was sorry but he could not come for dinner, not that night. He had an appointment on the water front, as he described it, and he could not get in touch with "her" to cancel it. He would come as soon as he could make it. He started to recount details of his appointment but him, too, Donna cut short. Open wire. Long distance. But she was relieved at the assurance that he would be there and glanced often at the clock.

"I always thought that was one of the nicest things about being married," her mother remarked pleasantly. "Always something to look forward to at the end of the day. I used to look at the clock every five minutes or so until Alan came and then I never thought of time again until we went to bed."

Donna clenched her teeth. She said nothing.

It was in a passion of impatience that she waited for Mark. When she caught herself glancing at the clock she averted her eyes, guiltily, remembering how her mother had watched it, waiting for her husband. Her impatience was intensified by a smoldering rage at her mother. Jean had brought a basket of fresh laundry and her sewing stand down to the living room, ensconced herself comfortably under a good light by the fireplace and was painstakingly going through an accumulation of garments that needed stitches.

"Time goes much faster if you keep doing something," she remarked sagely.

She fished in the box for a button to match those on one of Alan's shirts, comparing them critically under the light, seeking the exact size and color.

"In a way, it seems rather useless to mend these things of Alan's," she commented. "But we can give them away. They are too good for rags."

Donna closed her eyes tightly and swallowed the fiery words burning her lips.

She ran stumblingly to open the door when Mark rang the bell. She did not kiss him but she enclosed him, great coat and all, tightly, in both arms and buried her face against him. Mark kissed the top of her head. For a long instant she held him, then turned abruptly and went back to the living room. Mark tossed hat, coat and gloves onto a hall chair and followed her.

Mrs. Collwell greeted him with a friendly smile and a hand stretched up over her mending.

"Dear me!" he ejaculated. "Do women still go in for that sort of thing? Or is it a setting for a newsreel flash?"

"When someone invents a washing machine that will replace the buttons it yanks off, civilization will be getting somewhere," Mrs. Collwell said cheerfully.

Mark sat down and rubbed his hands complacently in the cheerful warmth of the fireplace. "You didn't give me a chance to tell you what I was up to this afternoon," he said reprovingly. "I can't remember when I have had a more exciting time. I was down on the water front measuring a church."

"Don't ask questions, Donna," Mrs. Collwell cautioned her daughter. "It's a gag."

Mark put his thumbs ostentatiously in his armpits and patted his chest with bland approval. "Ladies," he crowed, "regard me well. I have arrived."

"I know it," Donna commented briefly. "I let you in."

"Oh, I don't mean just getting here. I have attained the heights of the immortals. I have instituted a marriage."

"Nothing particularly unique about that," said Donna.

"There's plenty unique about this one. However, I will descend to your factual level since you insist. Sammy and Red Islip are going to be married and I am the vice-president in charge of church decoration. So I measured the church. Sammy met me there. We measured it together. When I think of me holding one end of a tape measure and beauty personified holding the other end—— Excuse me, till I catch my breath."

"They aren't going to be married until next year," objected Donna.

"Oh, yes, they are. They're going to be married as soon as they can prove they are healthy enough. And at my instigation. I am the overgrown Cupid sticking arrows into them. I am decorating the church. I am helping paint Red's apartment, too."

"Do you mean they are going to be married right away, Mark? They can't. The apartment will blow sky-high without Sammy."

"Ah, so your little comintern is dependent on a Staliness, is it? I thought all you comrades were equally high-minded, pure-souled and—excuse the commercialism—efficient."

"They can't run it without Sammy," Donna said. "Not for a minute. Maybe that is what she was going to tell me when I cut her off. How come you know so much about it?"

"I am their confidant. I am their adviser. Also, I am their painter and their furniture heaver and their church decorator."

"Well," Mrs. Collwell remarked meekly, "I must say I am rather glad she is getting married. To somebody else, I mean. Alan always said a beautiful wife made an unhealthy husband."

"Of course Red isn't married yet, but so far he is in the pink. The positive pink. 'Tain't funny, Magee."

"Mark," Donna broke in abruptly, "if you wanted to locate somebody in another town very quickly, how would you go about it?"

Mrs. Collwell laughed. "You might as well be an old married man, Mark. That's the way wives chuck things at their husbands when they're in a tight place. 'If you were where I am, darling, what would you do about it?' Many's the time Alan used to hear that. And he always had an answer, too."

Mark observed with acute amazement that there was venom in the glance Donna threw at her mother. Venom! In Donna's velvety eyes! And toward her mother!

"I suppose I'd send a telegram," he said carefully.

"I mean if you have no address. And if you aren't sure which town he's in. Oh, you may as well know. It's Dad. He's out West again and we want to get hold of him right away and we don't know where he is. We want to get hold of him—quickly, Mark. And desperately."

"Where is he out West? Chicago? He was there last week, wasn't he?"

"Yes. He went back Tuesday night. He finished things up in Chicago on Saturday. Then he was going to St. Louis and Minneapolis—both of them—but nobody knows where he was going first nor how long he was going to stay. He isn't at any of the hotels we know about and nobody has heard from him. Now how would you go about locating him?"

"Well, if it was very important to reach him quickly, I think I'd get a good detective agency on the job."

"How would you do that? We don't know anything about detective agencies in those towns. And we're not sure which town."

"Well, from here—" Mark spoke slowly, measuring his words, trying to catch a flash from Mrs. Collwell's eyes and failing—"well, from here, I'd line up the best agency in New York I think. They will have their own contacts in all those towns. They would check all hotels, and failing there, the high-class rooming houses. That would be a starter. Naturally they would check hospitals

and police records, warding against possible accident. Is it that sort of thing you had in mind?"

"The hotels first. How long would it take for a detective agency to check all the hotels in both those towns?"

"If they put enough men on, they should cover the ground by morning, I should think. Do you have to have him by morning?"

"We have to have him the first minute we can get hold of him. Will you take me to town, Mark, and line up the detective agency?"

"We don't have to go to town. I can do it from here by telephone. I'll use the company's name. After all, that podnership should be worth something."

"Will you do it, Mark? Right away? Tell them we do not care what it costs."

Mark looked searchingly at Mrs. Collwell, who did not meet his eyes. "Is it as important as that, Mom?" he asked. "Do you need him tomorrow as badly as that?"

"Donna does," she said quietly. "Personally I don't think it will do a bit of good but, if Donna wants to try it, it's perfectly all right. And we shan't mind the expense."

"Mother doesn't care!" Donna cried furiously. "She doesn't care! She is the one who——"

"Donna persists in thinking it was my idea, Mark. It wasn't. But if she thinks so—— Well, you can't help thinking what you think, I suppose."

"Is he sick, Donna?" Mark asked uneasily. "What shall I tell these people when I call up? What are they to do when they find him?"

"Nothing. Just find him. Wire us his address and keep an eye on him. Never let him out of their sight for a minute. Not for a minute."

"Your father will not like this, Donna," Jean warned her quietly.

"I don't care what he likes! I don't like it either! Please phone, Mark. Phone quickly. And we don't care what it costs."

"Do you object to it, Mrs. Collwell?" he asked. "Is there any reason why I shouldn't?"

"No, I do not object. And there isn't any reason why you shouldn't, since Donna wants it. But Alan won't like it."

"Mark, listen to me! Don't pay any attention to her. Mother—Mother is out of her mind. Dad is, too. Listen, Mark. My father went out there and isn't coming back. He's going to commit suicide. Mother knows it. She let him do it. That's why I've got to——"

Mark laughed aloud overwhelmed with relief. "Donna, you little fool," he cried. "Grow up and act your age. You know Dad Collwell wouldn't do a thing like that! Suppose he did have a row with your mother! Suppose he did mosey off in a huff threatening to do himself in! It doesn't mean a tinker's damn. For gosh sake! Dad Collwell isn't the type. He isn't that sort. He's probably laughing himself sick over it by this time."

"Tell him, Mother!" Donna's voice was harsh.

"We didn't have any row, Mark. We had a very pleasant week end."

"They—they sat here and talked about it for three days!" Donna cried angrily. "They went over his papers and fixed things up with the lawyer and played pinochle and—she didn't even tell me!"

Mark's troubled eyes went to Mrs. Collwell. "That's right," she assented. "He decided that was what he was going to do and he wanted to do it as—well, as comfortably as he could. Comfortably for us, I mean. That's all. It's just that Donna doesn't like it."

"Donna doesn't like it! Donna doesn't like it!" Donna rose to her small height and clenched both hands at her breasts. "She sits there and sews on buttons and says Donna doesn't like it. I tell you she's out of her mind!"

"Sit down, kitten," he said in a voice meant to be soothing but which rang hollowly. "Cool off. Be nonchalant. Light something or other. I'll phone. Personally, I think you're all crazy, the whole kit and boodle of you. But it shall never be said that I deserted a sinking booby hatch. Now give me the dope. Let me write it down. Name, I know that. Description, I doubt if they'll need that since his hotel registration will identify him. As many operatives on the job as necessary and cover the ground quickly. Expense no item. St. Louis or Minneapolis, you say? It would save time and money if we knew which."

"Cover them both." Donna was coherent again. "He was going both places."

"Right. There's no chance he would be using an assumed name, is there?" he asked suddenly. "That would be quite a complication."

"Oh, no," Mrs. Collwell said confidently. "That wouldn't fit his plan at all. He isn't going to disappear, you know. He wants them to find the body and identify it. Besides, he has business to transact in both those towns. He will have to do that under his own name. That is why Donna is so anxious to catch him in the first town, before he finishes up his business and—finishes up. Oh, he'll be under his own name! I'm sure of that."

"All right. I'll attend to it. You go and fix us a nice stiff drink, Donna. The jitters are catching."

"I always thought that was one of the nicest things about a husband," Mrs. Collwell remarked pleasantly. "He always thinks of something to do in an emergency. Lots of times, of course, things don't work out very well and often turn out very badly. But he always thinks of something."

Mark saw the tightening of Donna's fist and felt momentary panic that she was going to strike her placid parent. He caught her by the arm and whirled her about.

"The kitchen, my love," he said. "And make 'em stiff. I'll tend to my chore and you tend to yours."

17

"WHAT do we do now?" Donna demanded feverishly, when once again they were together around the fireplace.

"We wait," Mark said. "We converse. We meditate. We may get a call almost any minute. I told them to rush it. Maybe I'd better park here tonight."

"We'd love that, Mark," Mrs. Collwell said warmly. "Waiting is the lonesomest thing in the world."

"What worries me," Donna said moodily, "is that these other trips may be all bluff. He may not be going to those towns at all."

"What do you mean, Donna? He took the papers to transact business in those towns. Burgin told you he took them."

"Yes, I know. But remember, Mother, you said he was going to do this thing very—very perfectly, so it couldn't possibly be construed as anything but an accident. Well, if he told everybody he had to make those two towns and had the papers with him to prove it, and if the accident happened before he attended to those matters, wouldn't it be a little extra convincing? It seems to me he went out of his way to tell a lot of people he had to go to those two towns. He told Burgin, he told everybody in the New York office, everybody in the Chicago office, but carefully refrained from saying where he was going first. He didn't even tell you."

"I hadn't thought of that," Jean said thoughtfully. "Yes, I suppose it might add strong circumstantial evidence. But he planned it so carefully, Donna. Here, I mean, before he left. He had no

reason to tell me he had to go to Minneapolis and St. Louis if he had no intention of going there."

"Is he having any financial trouble, Mrs. Collwell?" Mark asked diffidently. "I know a lot of businesses are pretty much on the touch and go right now but everything about Dad seems so established, so secure."

"Oh, no. His business affairs are in fine shape. He made a great point of that. That's why he said the timing for it was so perfect. He left plenty for me to live on. That's why I wanted him to retire and go away, traveling, in foreign countries for a few years. Both of us, I mean. I would have gone with him. But he wouldn't hear of it."

"Mother," Donna said desperately, "we may as well tell Mark. He is trying to help us and we can trust him. Hadn't we better tell him the whole thing? As far as I am concerned, I don't care who knows it. We can publish it in the papers. We can broadcast it on the radio. If we don't find him pretty soon, I am going to call in the FBI."

"Yes, of course, Donna, I think you should tell Mark. I'll go up and see that David's room is ready."

"Mother! I want you to stay here!"

"I prefer to go upstairs, Donna."

"Mother, you stay right here and listen! If you don't hear every word I say, you will never believe I told him the truth."

"Oh, yes, I will, Donna. My faith hasn't been shattered. Only yours."

"Mother, I want you to stay!"

"Donna." Jean was quiet, erect and dignified, every inch maternal, every inch the mistress of her home.

Donna dropped limply back in her chair and Mrs. Collwell went softly upstairs.

"Come over here, sweet," Mark said gently. "Sit by me." His arm closed about the tense, unyielding little figure. "It doesn't

do any good getting all wrought-up and feverish over this. Your mother is taking it much more bravely."

"Mother!" The contempt in her voice dismayed him.

His hand toyed caressingly with her fingers, trying to ease away their rigidity.

"Mark," she began abrûptly, "my father was untrue to my mother."

"You mean there's a woman mixed up in this?" he asked quickly. "You should have told me. That changes things."

"Oh, no! Not now! Years ago. They didn't tell me but I found out. It gave me a very frightful feeling against—against marriage."

"I see," he said thoughtfully.

"It makes me feel a perfect fool trying to tell you about it," she said desperately. "Right now, in the face of all this, it makes me seem a wicked monster as well as an idiot. You started it."

"I?" he asked guardedly.

"You asked Mother what was wrong with their marriage and she asked me. I didn't want to tell her but she made me. So she told Dad and—oh, I guess years ago he talked her out of her resentment over that thing and she thought he could do the same for me. But Dad said he would rather die than talk to me about such a thing. And so he decided—well, he decided he would go ahead and die. I don't see how my father could do such a thing! He was always so good to me!"

She turned in his arms then and cried, cried deeply, her face on his breast, her slim shoulders wrenched with heart-deep sobs.

He tried to comfort her with his arms, his hands, his lips on her silvery hair.

"Ah, poor kid," he whispered pityingly.

"Poor fool, you mean," she retorted.

"Yes. Both, Donna, both."

He let her weep unrestrainedly for a while, then raised her

head and very gently patted the wet face with his handkerchief.

"She couldn't help it, Donna. His doing this, I mean. She would have stopped him if she could."

"I'm not sure, Mark, I'm not at all sure. She is so strange about it. Do you notice she already speaks of him in the past tense, as if he were dead? Maybe he is dead and she is just letting me suffer. Maybe I deserve it but they were never cruel to me before. . . . Of course," she added thoughtfully, "I was never hateful to Mother before, either. But she doesn't act angry with me."

"She isn't angry at you, Donna. This is just her way of standing it."

"She never stood things this way before. She always took hard things bravely, like David's death and what Dad did, but she never acted like this."

"Nothing like this ever happened before. But we'll find him, Donna. It must have been a great shock to him, Donna, learning after all these years that you had known it all the time. He must have been badly unnerved. I can see how he'd hate to face you with a thing like that. He always thought you were the sweetest thing in the world."

"But he would do this to me!"

"I don't understand it, Donna. He's making it pretty hard for himself, too. Don't forget that. And for your mother. It doesn't seem at all like Dad."

"No. At first I thought it was a trick to scare me. Then I thought Mother must have put him up to it. You know, Mark, women often think of much more devilish things than men."

"When was it you found out, Donna? About your father?"

"When it was going on. It was years ago. You wouldn't know anything about it."

"Why didn't you talk to your mother about it?"

"Oh, I couldn't. Besides, I was too ashamed of her. I was disgusted with her for putting up with it, letting him do such

things and putting up with it for the sake of keeping her home and the family respectability. I think I despised her more than I did Dad."

"That's odd," he said musingly. "That's very odd."

"What's odd?"

"Taking it that way and keeping everything bottled up inside you. So that's why you decided to take your marriages on the lam, as it were."

"Yes. I decided to give men exactly what they give us and do it first. I'd have started long ago if I hadn't been so much in love with you, Mark. It takes me a long time to get over things."

"Did this happen when you were a small child, Donna?"

"I was sixteen. I know exactly. It was the night of my party, my sixteenth-birthday party. And that made it worse, Mark, because it was that afternoon you told me you loved me. And I loved you. And then that night——"

He kissed her gently, a long time, but his eyes were reflective. "Why didn't you talk to David about it? Or me? It's better to talk things out than to keep such feelings buried down inside you. Especially at that age."

"Oh, I wouldn't have had David know for anything! He was always so crazy about Dad. He thought he was perfection on wheels!"

"Did you say this thing happened eight years ago? You're not talking about that redhead, are you? What was her name? Magdelen? Something like that."

Donna whirled about in his arms and stared at him. "What do you know about—that—redhead?"

"I know she was making a big play for your father and he was falling for it. David told me."

"David—David! Shh! Don't let Mother hear! Did you say David told you?"

"Sure. He was fit to be tied. He said he realized that a lot of middle-aged men make silly asses of themselves but he certainly

never expected it of his father. Especially with a wife like your mother! He was afraid she would lose her head and get a divorce and bust up the family. He thought she was wonderful. Don't you remember how all of a sudden he began making such a fuss over her, doing things for her, spending his allowance on her? How he wrote her from college every day and danced with her at parties? He was trying to make it up to her, keep her from feeling neglected. He was very proud of her. He said not one woman in a million would have kept her dignity, as she did, and held the family together. He said it didn't matter so much about him, he was so much older, but he couldn't bear to think of the effect it would have on you."

"Why didn't he say something to Dad? Dad would have listened to him."

"I told him to but he said you couldn't say things like that to your own father, especially a swell guy except for making such a fool of himself like your dad. He wanted me to talk to him, remind him of his duty. Me! Why, I'd as soon have tried laying down the law to Moses! Then he wanted me to flirt with her, try to wean her away from Dad."

"Why didn't you?"

"Because my affections were otherwise engaged. And I was too noble to be untrue to you, even in as good a cause as saving your father. We made it tough for them though." Mark smiled reminiscently.

"What did you do?" Donna's eyes, dead-black, were intent upon his face.

"We sleuthed. We found out there was a certain secluded corner where, on nights your father was presumably staying in town, he would pick her up and take her driving. So we made that corner one of our hangouts. And as soon as he'd pull up we'd go racing down and ask for a hitch home. He would stand her up and take us, too. Once he had her in the car before we could get there. He said, sure, he'd just taken on one passenger, why not

two more? He took her home first and didn't go out again that night. He was careful, I'll say that for him. Don't you see how much better it would have been if you had talked to us? You could have helped us sleuth. A girl's fine touch was all we needed."

"I still don't like it," she said, though the ghost of a smile touched her lips briefly.

"Neither did we. Dave especially. Don't you remember how thin he got that year, lost fifteen pounds and they wouldn't let him play football? That's what your father's philandering did to him. And don't you remember, whenever there were dances or parties at the clubhouse, how we'd always hitchhike home from college to be on deck for the goings on?"

"I thought you came to be with me."

"Not at all. We came to keep your mother from feeling neglected and to be sure she had dancing partners. And also we came to cut in when your Dad was dancing with the redhead. We took turns doing that. We nearly danced the legs off her. She was game about it but I'll bet the sight of us, and she saw plenty of us, almost turned her tummy. Dave said after the way your mother went through the crisis, if he ever did or said one thing, all his life, to cause her a minute's pain or worry, somebody ought to take him out and shoot him. He was proud because she was the one in a million who put her children and her home before her own hurt feelings. God, he was proud of her!"

"Mark, will you do something for me? Will you go upstairs and tell Mother what you have just told me?"

"Oh, Donna, I couldn't do that! It's different, talking to you. I couldn't say those thing to your mother."

"That's odd. Dad could talk to her but not to me. . . . But please do it, Mark, to please me. Mother deserves it. Tell her every word Dave said and how proud he was of her. I was really vicious to Mother, Mark. She has a right to know that one of her children wasn't a damn fool."

He held her in his arms a while, thinking it over. "Maybe you're right, Donna," he said uneasily and sighed deeply. "I flatly refused to tackle your father with it and now I have to rehash it with your mother. But maybe you're right and she deserves to know. Try to take it easier, Donna. Don't get so nervous, don't feel so angry. It doesn't do any good. I know it's tough, but take it as easily as you can. There's nothing we can do now but wait, so let's not make the waiting any harder than we have to."

"I'll try, Mark. I'll do my best. You go and tell Mother."

The waiting was not easy. Mark came down some time later and nodded his head curtly, brief acknowledgment that telling her mother had been right. She asked no questions. Conversation was forced and desultory, for the most part a monologue by Mark on the affairs of Sammy and Red Islip. Donna tried, not very successfully, to manifest an interest she did not feel and both were relieved when Mrs. Collwell came down and rejoined them.

"Is it too late for you to run down and see a movie?" she suggested helpfully. "I'll answer the telephone."

"I'd scream! I'd jump up and down and scream!" Donna protested. "They would call the cops and evict me."

Mark reverted grimly to conversation again but it was less difficult now, for, although it was perhaps assumed, Mrs. Collwell showed persistent interest. She made pertinent and suggestive comments.

"I never heard of a model marrying a minister." "Beauty is a frightful handicap for a minister's wife." "She had better stick to girls' classes in Sunday school. Mothers with adolescent sons are very suspicious of beauty."

She asked questions, too. "Is she interested in that kind of work or just interested in him?" "Is he a spiritual man or a good orator in search of an audience?" "Has her experience in the apartment given her pointers on getting along with other people?

Getting along with people is very important for a minister's wife."

Donna too, almost against her will, was drawn into the discussion of the Reverend Red and his prospective spouse. But beneath all the words they were acutely conscious that after all they were only waiting for the telephone to ring. Once it rang. Donna, dead-white, sat motionless. Mark and Mrs. Collwell waited.

"Shall I take it?" Mark suggested.

She shook her head. "No. I want to. Help me up, Mark." She was a dead weight under his hand as she got to her feet.

It was a wrong number.

"If they give us another wrong number call, I'll throw the telephone right through the window!" she said passionately.

"If you do, we couldn't answer if your father called," Mrs. Collwell reminded her.

The wrong number, infuriating as it was, suggested a new train of consideration.

"What are you going to say to your father when you get him?" Mrs. Collwell asked.

"I'm going to tell him to come home," Donna said.

"But why? What reason are you going to give? We never ask him to come home from his business trips. How are you going to explain that you have been looking for him? If you say anything about this matter, he will hang up on you. He will not talk."

"Hang up on me! Dad? Why, he wouldn't hang up on me." Then she added more thoughtfully, "Did he ever hang up on you, Mother?"

"No. I never mentioned unpleasant things over the phone. But a couple of times when I kept talking about things he did not want to discuss, he got his hat and walked out of the house and did not come back that night. Men always run away from unpleasant subjects if they get a chance."

Donna looked imploringly at Mark.

"You know he wouldn't hang up on me!" she pleaded. "Not on me!"

"He might at that," Mark admitted reluctantly. "Since he has made up his mind not to discuss this thing, the chances are he isn't going to discuss it. And hanging up on you would be the easiest out."

"Think of something! Think quickly, before the phone rings. What can I say? I know! I'll tell him Mother is sick. That will bring him posthaste."

"You will do no such thing," Mrs. Collwell said firmly. "Your father chose his own way of taking care of this matter and I will not be a party to such subterfuge."

"Not even to save my father's life!" Donna accused her.

"Not to interfere with what he considers the right thing for him to do. You most certainly may not tell him I am sick."

"I could say I am sick," she said, more doubtfully.

"He would hardly believe you are seriously ill if you are up answering the telephone" was the quiet reminder.

"Mark, think of something! Think quickly! What shall I say?"

Mark strummed his fingers together uneasily. "There's another nasty angle to it, too," he said slowly. "Now I don't believe for one minute that Dad Collwell will do this thing. It just isn't his nature to do this sort of thing. And he wouldn't walk out on Mrs. Collwell like that; you know he wouldn't. Maybe for a while, when he was upset, he thought he would, but when he came to his senses he would never go through with it. But suppose he is still pretty much upset and hanging onto his crazy obsession. He didn't know Mother Collwell was going to tell you, Donna. He was going to enlighten you himself, by letter, when it was over. Now if he gets wind that you are wise to it and determined to prevent it, mightn't he—it's only a thought, of course!—but mightn't he just leap off the deep end and do it right away? Mightn't it hurry things up instead of stopping them? There's

not much point to his writing the letter now that you already know."

Donna collapsed limply in her chair. Mrs. Collwell, for the first time, showed consternation.

"Mark!" she whispered. "It might. It really might."

"I still do not think he will go through with it," Mark added stoutly. "Not for a minute do I think he will."

Donna and her mother stared at each other.

"We mustn't let him know I know it," Donna said thickly. "We've got to lie about it. We've got to think of something else."

Silence throbbed in the room.

"It was probably just a cockeyed notion of mine," Mark said lamely. "I just happened to think of it."

Donna's eyes, without a fleeting glance in his direction, were riveted to her mother's, now showing uncertainty and fright.

"I know," she said. "I'll tell him Mark and I are going to be married. I'll tell him I've quit my job and moved back home and Mark and I are going to be married the minute he gets here. That ought to do it."

"Won't he be surprised at our being in such a hurry after all these years?" Mark wondered mildly.

"He knows how I am," Donna said. "For eight years he has been expecting it. You couldn't consider it much of a hurry after waiting eight years." Her eyes did not waver from her mother's face.

"No," she said slowly, speaking with difficulty, "he wouldn't be surprised at anything Donna does."

Donna turned to Mark triumphantly. "You see? And I thought of it myself!"

"Yes," Mrs. Collwell continued, "I think he would come for that. If Donna asked him. But, oh, my dears," she said sadly, "I'm afraid to think of what he will do when he gets here and finds out it was all a hoax and we have tricked him. He will blame me, too, for telling you. He will never forgive any of us for doing

a thing like that. Even to save his life. I can't bear to think of what he might do."

Donna moistened her pale, parched lips. "It will not be a hoax, Mother. We'll do it. We'll go right through with it. I'll resign my job first thing in the morning. I'll bring my things home from the apartment. We'll go through with it as soon as he gets here."

"You mean you'll go through with getting married as soon as he gets here?" Mark asked cautiously, though his eyes were glinting.

"Yes. As soon as he gets here."

"I won't," Mark said. "I'm willing to hoax him long enough to get him home and talk some sense into him. Once we get hold of him we can make him see it's all right for a nice guy to make a fool of himself once in a lifetime, but once is enough. But no marriage. Not with me as the party of the second part. That's out."

Donna gazed at him, wide-eyed, unbelieving. "Mark!"

"I haven't forgotten the blueprint you gave me of your future marriage. It's not my idea of marriage. Count me out. I'm willing to do a lot for Dad Collwell but no marriage mortgage on my future."

"I didn't mean you, Mark. That's why I wouldn't marry you when I had—those feelings. Mother, didn't I say that? Isn't that why I wouldn't marry Mark?"

"Yes, that's true, Mark. She said she couldn't do that to you."

"Didn't I say I couldn't do it to anybody I loved and that's why—— Never mind that. Isn't that what I said, Mother?"

"Yes, that's what you said."

"Mark, since I was sixteen years old, have I ever denied to you or to anybody else that I love you devotedly?"

"No," he admitted. "You never denied that. You just didn't love me enough, that's all."

"That's what Alan says," Mrs. Collwell began. But Donna interrupted her.

"You see, Mark? You see! It's going to work! It's beginning to work already. She's speaking of Dad in the present tense again!

She knows it's going to work. Where's my engagement ring?"

"I don't lug it around with me everyplace I go," he said indignantly. "How did I know I was going to find a finger to wear it?"

"Bring it tomorrow. Get me a wedding ring, too. And none of us must ever breathe a word of this to anybody on earth. Our wedding has got to be just as authentic as his accident. The poor dumb cluck! Let him keep on living in a fool's paradise if he wants to." And then she added, with a break in her voice, "But please, dear God, let him keep on living."

18

As a betrothal, it was grotesque and fantastic. There was more of sadness in it than of joy. Although Donna's lips met Mark's with responsive tenderness, there was more of fright and foreboding than ecstasy in their cold clingingness. Mark thought often without envy of the exultant, joyous oneness of Sammy and the Reverend Red. Theirs was a rare and unique unity. He did not begrudge them their precious heritage. They had worked and sacrificed and studied to attain their harmony. They had earned it. He and Donna had yet much to learn of love and of each other.

Tuesday morning brought disappointing news from the detective agency. Their operatives, both in St. Louis and Minneapolis, had been unable to discover any trace of the missing Alan Collwell. Mark told them tersely to keep trying. He telephoned his secretary that he would not be in until one o'clock and then but briefly and gave her the Collwell number for emergency calls. Donna telephoned her radio bureau and tendered her resignation. When offered the flattering alternative of a vacation and a raise in salary, she declined without equivocation. She said she was through working.

Again the morning mail was awaited with the painful blending of hope and dread and when the postman came neither Donna nor her mother ventured to receive it. Mark brought it in, skimmed hurriedly through it and, to ease the fear that gnawed at Donna's eyes, called quickly, "Nothing for you, Donna! Not a thing." Cheerfully he added, "Here's one from Dad for you, Mother Collwell. From St. Louis. So he went there first."

Mrs. Collwell opened it hurriedly, with shaking fingers, conscious of the eyes intent upon her.

"Oh, Forrest!" she ejaculated. "That's the name of the man in St. Louis. I knew it had something to do with trees."

Donna's shuddering gasp was her only comment.

"There's nothing important in it," Mrs. Collwell said brightly. "Shall I read it to you?" And taking their breathless attention for acquiescence she read slowly.

" 'Dear Jeanie: Writing this in St. Louis station waiting for train for Min.' He means Minneapolis, of course. He always abbreviates big words. 'Forrest met me Sunday A.M. and took me out to his place. Very nice place. Nice family. No trouble at all about the stock. He was glad to get hold of it. Spent the night there. Hotels jammed. Arranged everything yesterday and this morning we signed the papers. Nice little nest egg it is, too. Not bad business. Off to Min. now. Don't care much whether I sell the ranch shares or not. Nothing to do about that but cash the check once a year. May do a little hunting in Min. They always invited me but couldn't afford the time before. May take them up on it this trip. Hope you and Donna are O.K. Love and kisses. Dad.' That's all."

"Let me see it, Mrs. Collwell," Mark said eagerly. "The envelope, too. Written Monday afternoon. Air mail. I'll phone the agency to concentrate on Minneapolis now. Evidently he is really going there."

He tossed the letter to Donna and went to the den to put his call through.

"Anyhow, nothing has happened yet," Donna said with faint hope and added dully, "At least not when he wrote this."

"I do not know how long it takes to go from St. Louis to Minneapolis," Mrs. Collwell said. "He never went to both towns on the same trip before. Sometimes he would go to one, sometimes the other, but never both on the same trip."

"This is a special trip," Donna said unhappily.

"Yes. But at least he hasn't had time to transact his business there yet. The wheat ranch is 'way out in the country."

"Yes. If he transacts his business. It's going to be a hunting accident," she said shrewdly. "He is tipping you off to that. He never went hunting there before. This time he is going hunting. Nobody ever asks questions about hunting accidents."

Mark left at noon for a hurried trip to New York, Donna sternly declining his invitation to go into town with him, get her mind on other things. She said she didn't want to get her mind on other things She had to be there to remind her mother what to say if the telephone should ring.

"Remember, Mother," she cautioned her repeatedly, "when he asks to speak to you, as he always does, you just back up every word I say. Mark and I are engaged and are going to be married the minute he gets home. And it is the truth."

"What shall I say if he asks if I told you what he plans to do?"

Donna met her eyes doggedly. "You'll have to lie. Lie like a lady. You have to, Mother. Doesn't it say in the Bible that a bad promise is better broken than kept? Well, it's the same with a lie. A good lie is better told than left unsaid. This is a good lie. Will you do it?"

"Well, I suppose I could do that," her mother said reluctantly. "I've never really lied to Alan. Not about anything important. I suppose we could call this an unimportant lie and those don't really count."

Donna's eyes turned expressively heavenward but returned immediately and severely to her mother's face. "Of course it can be called unimportant." She strove to repress an ironic intonation. "It's just a trifling did-you-did, or did-you-didn't. You say, 'Certainly not,' and there's an end of it."

It was nearly five when Mark returned and he knew, without question, that there was no news. The faces of both women were pale and drawn, their eyes wan and dark-circled.

"Engagement ring, my love," he said with what cheerfulness he

could muster. "Mrs. Collwell, I have the honor to ask you for your daughter's hand."

"You're welcome to it" was the lifeless answer.

Donna forced a ridiculous semblance of laughter. "Proverbial match-making mamma! She can't wait to be rid of me!"

"And what is more," Mark continued bravely, "I bought the wedding ring, too, to make it more authentic when you tell him we are set for the ball and chain."

"What will you do if he doesn't come?" Mrs. Collwell asked. "Can you take the ring back?"

"No!" he shouted explosively. "We are as good as married right now! You darn-fool women need a man around here to browbeat you. You're spoiled. I daresay you'll drive me to—to——"

"To suicide?" Donna prompted softly.

"No! To horsewhip the pair of you! And Dad'll hold you down while I apply the lash. I'd like to show you the wedding ring, too, for I think it is very pretty. But I believe that is not considered etiquette. It's one thing the bride has to take and pretend she likes. Stick out your finger, honey. With this engagement ring I do solemnly beg to advise that you will never get away from me as long as we both shall live."

He put it on her finger, then raised her face in both hands and kissed her, a sad and tender kiss, softened with pity.

"I'll check with the agency again, just to make sure," he said briskly. "Is there any chance, Mother Collwell, that he could be visiting someone in Minneapolis as he did in St. Louis? A pretty penny that cost us! He saved a hotel bill and we squandered a hundred times the amount on detectives."

"I really do not know, Mark. He has never stayed there more than a couple of days. He always goes out to the ranch——"

"What is the name of the ranch?"

"I really don't know. He just calls it the ranch. I suppose that is where he's going hunting."

"He is going hunting, Mark," Donna said crisply. "They always invited him but he has never gone before. This time he's going. Would it seem to suggest a hunting accident?"

"Oh, it may just be that he feels he has the time this trip where he always hurried before," Mark said reassuringly. "Hunting accidents are pretty hard to arrange."

The evening passed and the next day and they received no word. The agency, failing to locate him in Minneapolis went to work on St. Paul, on the faint chance that, with overcrowded hotel facilities, he might have been forced to seek accommodations in the Twin City. They found no trace of him. Yet he had left St. Louis on Monday. Now it was Wednesday evening. And he never stayed long in Minneapolis, never more than a day or so.

"I think I know a way we might get hold of him," Mark said at last in unmistakable desperation. "It sounds very silly but it might work. It will make a good deal of a fool of me and of Donna, too, for that matter. But it just might work."

"What, Mark?" Donna's lips were cold and colorless.

"It looks like a play to the galleries but we three know it is not that and we're the only ones involved. I know a darned good reporter on one of the big Chicago papers. He's really a feature writer and he is tops. He's on the radio, too. I knew him in the army. He's had two or three small articles about things that happened to me in the war. I, for one, had some good luck in that war and got out of a few tight jams by the skin of my teeth. Not that teeth have skin."

"What could he do about Dad?"

"Well, if he wrote a humorous article about a certain highly decorated pilot, who got lost three times during the war and found his way out again, and mentioned that said pilot was now stuck high and dry, having bride and wedding ring on tap, but couldn't locate a father to give the bride away—— Well, it's a lot of hooey, of course, but the press eats that sort of thing up.

They'd give it a wide and rollicking spread and radio commentators would pick it up for a laugh and the chances are Dad might come across it. Or some of his friends might. If one paper used it, the others would run it as a rewrite and it would go all over that section like wildfire."

"What are you waiting for?" Donna demanded. "Call him up."

"But you see, darling, he would have to use our names, our names and Dad's. It wouldn't be any good otherwise. And they wouldn't use it anonymously."

"Are you ashamed of marrying me?"

He smiled at her. "No, my sweet, but everybody we know will kid the pants off both of us. Can you take it?"

"Certainly I can take it. Are you sure your friend will play it up?"

"Sure. He'll consider it a favor. He may send us a wedding present. He'll get paid for it, too, and he doesn't write for chicken feed. But he'll make it very ridiculous, Donna, and roast me within an inch of my life. What do you think? Should we give it a whirl?"

"Certainly."

He looked at Mrs. Collwell.

"I don't think Alan would object to that," she said gravely. "He has a very good sense of humor. He would consider it a good joke on you after waiting all these years. Yes, I am sure he would think it quite funny."

"Hurry up," Donna said.

"It may take quite a while," he said. "I may have trouble locating him."

"Just get started and stick to it."

Mark went to the den and closed the door behind him.

Donna and her mother regarded each other somberly for some minutes.

"You know, Donna," Mrs. Collwell said suddenly, "Mark is

really more resourceful than I would have expected. David was always so much cleverer than he."

Donna rewarded her with a faint smile, sad, but still a smile. "You are sure Dad will not object to this?"

"Oh, no. I am sure he will think it all very funny. He does enjoy a good joke. And after he sees that, he will probably never think of asking if I told you about his plan. I am glad of that. You couldn't really call a lie like that completely unimportant, you know."

"No." Donna sighed wearily. "Not completely unimportant."

It was nearly an hour later when Mark emerged from the den, mopping his brow exhaustedly.

"All set," he said. "He's on. He nearly laughed himself sick over it. Brace yourself for guffaws in the next few days. The New York papers will pick it up, too. And to think we can't stick Dad for the telephone bill!"

"Why not? He never objects to our bill."

"He would to this one. And he'd want to know what all the words were about, at so much a syllable. Plus tax. No, this is on me. It was done exclusively to get Donna married to me, hence chargeable to the groom, like the ring and parson. Getting Dad back is purely incidental."

"Completely unimportant," said Donna, and could almost smile again. Doing something, doing anything, made waiting less unbearable.

Still the evening was long and dreary and the morning brought no uplift to their jaded spirits. The agency had nothing to report. There was no mail.

At eleven o'clock, Mark, himself reduced to a state of abject dejection, made a sudden suggestion. "What do you say we ask Sammy and Red to come out this afternoon? At least, they will bring something fresh for us to talk about."

"Sammy wouldn't come," Donna said. "She never goes any-

place, except, of course, to business and classes and on dates with Red."

"She might. Shall I try? I can phone Red. You'll like them, Mother Collwell."

"I think it would be very nice. Ask them to stay to dinner. Just having somebody else to look at will help a little."

"Ask them if you like," Donna said with a slight shrug of her slim shoulders. "I'll bet you a dollar Sammy can't come."

"You're on. I'll soon find out."

The call to Red, to Donna's relief, craving an open line to their number, was very brief. "Red? . . . Mark. I'm out at Donna's in New Jersey. Listen, Red, couldn't you and Sammy come out this afternoon and spend the rest of the day with us? I have the car. I'll come and pick you up, anyplace you say."

"I can't get hold of Sammy until noon, Mark. I don't know her plans. I'll call you back after I talk to her. But you needn't bother to meet us. We'll bus over and take a taxi. Save time that way. If Sammy can't make it, do you want me to come anyhow?"

"Yes. Yes, Red, I wish you would."

"O.K. I'll be seeing you. Suppose I don't bother calling back then. If she can come, there'll be two of us. If she can't, I'll be a solo. So long."

"The bet was on Sammy," Donna reminded him. "I don't know anything about Red except that he doesn't like parties. But I know Sammy never accepts invitations unless there's business in the background."

"Want to raise the ante?" Mark said sportingly. "It's worth two bucks of my money."

"Done. I want to begin building up a housekeeping reserve against the time my budgets do not balance."

Sammy and Red came together quite early in the afternoon and Donna in sudden shyness left it to Mark to make the introductions.

"Mother Collwell," he said, and his prideful pleasure gave a new lift to his voice, "this is Sammy Ingram, the future Pride of the Parish. And this is the Reverend Red, Red Islip."

Laughter broke the slight tension among them and immediately they were seated Sammy launched into a gay recital of the woes of their hall-bedroomers in the apartment.

"We had a conference last night, and when I told them you and I are both leaving, Donna, they were simply stricken dumb. But it didn't last long. They wanted to know who was going to keep things running, and who would keep them on good terms with one another, and who would bring them flowers and fruit from New Jersey. They wanted to know a thousand things. And immediately they began reminding one another of their little personal peccadilloes and cautioning themselves to step softly and curb their eccentricities. And Leda got a notebook and began writing down all the precepts we have been hurling at them. She's going to have Joey make a large copy and get it framed for the living room."

The telephone rang and the room was electrified into silence. Mark stopped abruptly mid-sentence. Mrs. Collwell's hands closed tightly together. Donna, with a despairing glance at Mark, went unsteadily to the den in answer. Not a word was spoken in her absence.

They heard the crash of the receiver back onto the cradle and the metallic click of her heels as she marched back.

"Wrong number!" she cried angrily.

Mrs. Collwell's hands relaxed again and Mark sighed deeply.

Red broke the awkward pause. "We're very fond of Mark, Mrs. Collwell," he said pleasantly. "But we have never met any one more deflating to our egos. He thinks Sammy is too good-looking and I am too redheaded for the spiritual profession. I do not know what line he would recommend for us."

"It surprises me, too," Mrs. Collwell admitted. "You really do not expect such—such unusual beauty in a parsonage. And I

must say I never heard of a model becoming a minister's wife. And I would never have expected Mark, of all people, to take such a fancy to a preacher."

"By the way, Mark," Sammy said, "Leda and Joey were delighted with the box of clothes you sent. Joey thought they should be divided up among two or three of her clients but Leda insisted that she might not find another fit for him for months. It's the best wardrobe he has ever had. He acts quite peacocky."

"Did you send Joey some clothes, Mark?" Donna asked.

"Some old junk I had lying around," he said sheepishly. "Nothing any good. He's about my size. I sent it to Leda."

"And Mark," Sammy said, "Leda asked me to give you this. It was in one of the pockets. This ten-dollar bill. It's the same bill."

Mark blushed darkly. "I didn't know she would go through the pockets," he said. "I thought he might come across it himself."

"He did. He took it back to Leda. She wanted him to keep it, claiming ignorance of the donor's whereabouts, but he wouldn't take it. Joey's very proud. He told her to use it on some of her more suffering clientele. Did you put it there to test him, Mark?"

"Test him!" His surprise was obvious. "No! Why should I test him! I knew he wouldn't know where the clothes came from and figured he would have to keep it. I thought maybe he could use it."

Sammy smiled warmly. "Yes, that's what we thought. But Leda couldn't talk him into it."

"I know how we can make him take it," Donna exclaimed, and real hearts showed momentarily in her brightening eyes. "You and I will go down to his dump of a studio and pick out a picture to give Sammy and Red for a wedding present. We'll tell him Sammy wants it particularly as a souvenir of all the peaches we have peeled together."

"That's lovely, Donna! That's perfect. And we'll frame the picture, too, and hang it in Red's barn."

"Red's barn!"

"That's what we call his apartment," Sammy explained laughingly.

They talked, they listened and they laughed. The hours did not drag. Only the ringing of the telephone galvanized them into rigid attentiveness. Donna, answering in trembling terror, invariably reported back unhappily that it was some friend, some neighbor, nothing at all.

Mark, who once before in that same room had brazenly announced the state of unengagement between Donna and himself, now reported joyously that he and Donna were going to be married too, very soon now, "as soon as Dad Collwell gets home from his trip out West."

"But it will not interfere with my churchly chore for you," he said. "Donna can help me. She's very good at lugging potted palms and begonias."

Sammy and Red were sincerely pleased and congratulatory.

"He was just practicing up on us, Red," Sammy said. "His success in wangling us into it must have gone to his head. And now, after all, you will probably beat us to the altar!"

"Only because they live in New Jersey where their hygiene is taken for granted," Red protested. "Do statistics prove that New Jersey is healthier or just more trusting than New York?"

When Donna suggested that Mark fix some drinks, Mrs. Collwell glanced at Red uneasily.

He smiled at her reassuringly. "Yes, I really am a preacher," he said. "And I am a temperance engine, too, but not a strict teetotaler."

"Come along, Sammy," Donna said. "We'll see if we can dig out some crackers and spreads of some kind. We're usually pretty well stocked. You want to see the rest of the house anyway."

In the large, sunny kitchen, she swiftly produced boxes of crackers and small jars of meat and cheese mixtures and handed Sammy a knife. Smilingly they set to work.

"Sammy," Donna said briskly, "why did you drop all the things you had to do today and come out here?"

"Because Mark asked us."

"Would you have come if I had asked you, Sammy?"

Sammy's hesitation was slight. "Perhaps not, Donna. Probably not. Because I would have known you were just asking me superficially. Even if you had needed me, you wouldn't have asked me, would you?"

"No, I suppose not. Not before today, anyhow." Her voice was humble. "But Mark didn't say he needed you. I heard him at the phone. He didn't say anything."

"He asked us to come, Donna. It pleased Red and me very much, more than I can tell you. Friendship is a funny thing, isn't it? It isn't just a spontaneous little outburst like a mushroom. It has to be worked at. There has to be a little give and a lot of take. More take than give, I think, and that requires practice. I am not speaking of *things*, you know. Maybe I mean feelings. . . . Your mother is sweet, isn't she? Mark dotes on her. He says she is the nearest approach to a mother he ever had, and the approach is very near."

"We aren't always so lugubrious."

"I know. I feel better-acquainted with you today, Donna, than during all the months we have lived together in the apartment. It is the first time you ever let me see you. I like you in the natural."

"I feel naked," Donna said, flushing slightly. "As if I should run away and put some clothes on. But I am just too miserable and too tired. . . ." Her voice trailed away.

"But you're a very brave girl, Donna. You'll be all right. You're all right now."

When the girls with the tray of canapés, and Mark with the

highball glasses, re-entered the living room, they found Mrs. Collwell leaning forward in her chair gazing as one spellbound at Red's big pleasant face with the good-natured, oddly keen gray eyes.

"But, Mr. Red," she ejaculated, "I never heard of anybody just going out and buying a church and setting himself up in business. I don't think the other churches will like it."

"Oh, I don't think they'll mind."

Donna and Mark passed silently around from one to another with their trays and sank down into easy chairs to listen.

"You see, we're not going to compete with other churches. We're not going to have members. We're not going to take collections. We're just going to pick up a lot of loose ends the regular churches cannot or do not take care of. We're going to be what you might call a churches' church."

"A churches' church! I never heard of such a thing."

"Well, it's something like a doctors' doctor, or a lawyers' lawyer, or a teachers' teacher. We're not going to start charities, or relief collections, or bazaars or anything like that. But when the other churches have a campaign on, we're going to offer our help and pitch right in and work our heads off, helping them. Let them reap the success and get the credit. We're not even going to have church services at regular hours. No competition at all. We're going to have our Sunday school at the usual church hour, so the devout will have a snug place to park their children while they imbibe a little divine worship in their own pews."

"But children will not go to two Sunday schools in one day," she objected.

"Some of them will. Our Sunday school isn't going to be orthodox either. We're going to play Bible games and do Biblical charades and tableaux and have contests with prizes. I think the kids will like it."

"Will it promote their religion?"

"I don't know. But it will teach them a few things about the

Bible. It will give them something to think about. It will keep them off the streets. And it will help teach them good sportsmanship."

"I never heard of such a thing," she confessed amazedly.

"Don't let it throw you, Mother Collwell," Mark said encouragingly. "He had me doing loops for a while, too, but I finally landed right side up."

"Do you think you will like being a—a preacher's wife?" she asked, turning to Sammy.

"I will love being Red's wife," she said confidently. "And I am furious that he kept me waiting all these years. If it hadn't been for Mark I doubt if I ever could have pinned him right down to it."

Mrs. Collwell and Donna, with understanding glances, rose from their chairs murmuring vague words about preparations for dinner.

"May I come, too?" Sammy asked eagerly and when they nodded smiling assent, she followed them to the kitchen. "I have to brush up on this culinary racket," she explained. "So far, when we have eaten together, Red has done the cooking so I shall have to work overtime to catch up with him."

Mrs. Collwell turned abruptly, one hand on the refrigerator door.

"Do you mean he cooks, too, along with everything else he does?"

"Yes. He's a good cook, too. He loves to cook. And he gets more kick out of polishing up a stewpan than most people get out of night clubs. He loves it. He loves everything."

"What do you love?"

"Only him" was the fervent answer. Then she laughed and added quickly, "That is not true, of course. I love a thousand things. Music and dancing and the theater and the church and pretty clothes and colors. I used to love modeling, but not any more. You were right, Mrs. Collwell, what you said about modeling. I feel the same way about it. Really, it is only emphasizing and showing off a nice figure, nice curves, nice movements. A lift of

the arm where it will show a provocative breast line. A gesture of the knee to play up the slope of a hip. That sort of thing. It comes very easy to women. Doing what comes nacherly, I suppose. But Red has made me a little self-conscious about it. Not intentionally, quite unconsciously, I'm sure. He never says I have nice legs or a well-adjusted torso. He refers to it as my temple, something designed especially for me. Sometimes he calls me his Taj Mahal. So I have come to be rather choice about my person. I shall be glad to quit modeling. I shall like Sunday school charades much better."

Mrs. Collwell had stood quite motionless, listening, not lifting her hand from the freezer door.

"I owe you an apology," she said. "I thought Mark was exaggerating. He wasn't. He couldn't."

Sammy laughed. "I hope you are referring to more than my face and figure."

"Yes. I mean you. But your looks are part of you, Sammy."

Mark and Red, left alone, sat in comradely silence awhile.

"Thanks for coming, Red," Mark said at last.

"We were glad to come, Mark."

"Yes, I know. That's what I am thanking you for. For being glad to come."

"Pretty tough going, huh?"

"Very tough. Horrible. Let me tell you——"

"No, don't, Mark. Not today. They know we came here cold and are going it blind. I think it will work out better if we keep it on just that basis. There's nothing tangible we can do, is there?"

"Not a thing. But your presence is tangible and it's helping. I don't think Donna could have stood much more of it without a break."

"She's a lovely girl."

"It's a lovely family. And it's my family." Mark's voice was harsh and strained.

It would have been a pleasurably social evening except for the

unremitting consciousness that three pairs of ears were straining, with hope and with fear, for a ring of the telephone; that three pairs of eyes lifted, too often, to the hands of the clock recording the inexorable passing of precious moments.

Red had arranged for the taxicab to return for them at a quarter to eleven, in time to catch the late bus to the city. When Mark protested, offering to drive them, Red gave him a straight deterring look, a look that said as plainly as words, "Stay here. They need you."

"I can't tell you how happy we are that you came today," Mrs. Collwell said, as the time neared eleven and Sammy began a woman's usual preliminary gestures toward imminent departure. "We were getting very restless, just waiting around all by ourselves. It was wonderful having you."

"Would you like us to run out awhile tomorrow?" Red suggested casually.

"You wouldn't!" Donna exclaimed.

"Who wouldn't?" he countered drawlingly.

"Would you?" Mark asked quickly.

"Sure. The first prerequisite to successful preaching is to have a good long line of dependable substitutes on tap. I am equipped with that prerequisite. I am tied up in the morning but I can come in the afternoon."

"We get along pretty well in the morning," Mrs. Collwell said. "There's the telephone and the mail and the grocery order—things like that. It would be wonderful if you could come again. I never saw people so easy to talk to. Or so interesting about it."

"O.K. Sammy will check her appointments and we'll make it as early as we can."

As they moved toward the hall, Donna touched her finger lightly to Red's arm.

"Wait a minute," she whispered. "Come over here." She drew him to the other side of the room, into the alcoved entrance to the dining room, well removed from the others in the hall.

"Red, tell me. Are you the kind of preacher who goes in for high ideals and moralistic platitudes and ringing oratory or—or do you really believe in God and prayer and old-fashioned things like that?"

He took her small, cold hands firmly in his big, warm clasp.

"I believe in God and prayer and everlasting things like that," he said gravely.

"Then when you go to bed tonight," she went on, breathless but determined, "would you say a little prayer for us? And for my father? We need it."

"I'll be glad to, Donna. I was going to any way but I am glad you asked me. That makes it much stronger. Working together. Co-operation. Co-operation is very strong."

"Do you need to know anything specific—or is that enough?"

"That's enough. That's all I need to know. But you can help, Donna. You can be a great help."

"How?" she whispered doubtingly.

"When you go to bed tonight and begin feeling lost and terrified and your thoughts keep nagging away at troubling things, you tell your little mind to mind its own business. Tell it the Big Mind has taken charge of all these things. Make your little mind keep hands off. Leave it to the Big Mind and go to sleep."

"I'll try, Red. Thank you."

When they had gone, Mrs. Collwell put her hands on her hips, planted herself firmly on both small feet and exclaimed emphatically, "Well! That is the most remarkable couple I ever saw in my life. If I hadn't seen it with my own eyes I wouldn't believe it. I'm not sure I believe it anyhow."

Mark laughed, his pleasure saturated with pride. They were his friends.

"Mark," Donna said briskly, "how about having Red marry us?"

Mark swept her off her feet into his arms. "Donna, you darling! There's nothing I'd like better!"

"But will it be legal? Has he been ordained? I want this to be absolutely binding forever and ever."

"It will be binding. He was ordained last year. He's working for his S.T.D. now. And I'll bet you that two dollars you owe me that you do not know what S.T.D. stands for."

Donna and her mother considered it frowningly.

"Doctor of Siamese Twins?" was the best Donna could suggest.

"Scientific Theology," he informed her loftily. "Anything you want to know about theology, just ask me. I'm full of it. Red is catching."

"Very well, braggart. I do not know about the rest of you but I think I am going to sleep tonight. Let's go to bed!"

19

THE morning brought no news but both Donna and her mother looked less harried, more removed from the breaking point and Mark, quickly responsive, felt his own spirits lifting. And they had things to talk about, things that occupied their lips with words and served to detour their sorry thoughts.

Mrs. Collwell asked innumerable questions about Sammy and Red, and Mark, as their chosen friend, took it upon himself to answer, effectively utilizing her interest. She busied herself with preparations for a special dinner, a particularly good dinner, and when they accused her of trying to show off and make an impression she said defensively, "Everybody prepares special dinners for the minister. Though I certainly never expected to see a man like Red in the pulpit. I am not at all sure but it will be a very nice change."

Both women took considerable pains with their dressing, too, always a good sign, and chose their most becoming house gowns.

"It's an odd thing about beauty," Mrs. Collwell remarked. "Somehow you feel you have to play up to it, sort of rise to meet it. Even when somebody else has it. Maybe the beauties have that feeling, too. Maybe it is that, instead of vanity, which makes them take such pains with their appearance."

"Why don't you play up to Red's religion, too?" Mark asked teasingly, trying to encourage their upsurge of spirit. "You might put a Bible on the hall table and scatter a few tracts and pamphlets on the cocktail tray. We don't want him to think we are heathens."

"You can laugh if you want to, Mark," she said firmly, "but I give you my word if he ever does buy himself a church, I shall go

and hear him preach if I have to travel half-way round the world. . . . Did you ever hear of anybody buying a church just so he could run it to suit himself? If he didn't seem so sensible otherwise I would think he was crazy."

Sammy and Red arrived together in mid-afternoon and were welcomed with eager, revealing warmth.

"We thought you would never get here!" Mrs. Collwell exclaimed.

"I was never so glad to see anybody in my life," added Donna. "We've been looking forward to you all day. . . . And I had never expected to be looking forward to anything as long as I live."

"Except your marriage, I trust you mean," Mark reminded her neatly.

"Oh, yes, our marriage. Our marriage, Mark! Ask him. Ask him right away."

Mark frowned. "I do not know if it is my place," he said dubiously. "I am not up on these religious rites. Red, you ought to know. Who is supposed to invite the officiating clergy for a wedding? The groom or the bride's parents? We want to be correct about this."

Red showed surprise. "I don't know," he said. "I never thought about it. I don't suppose there is any ironclad rule. I should think the one closest to him. I have already asked ours, because he is my friend as well as a remote and highly superior relative. I don't think there is any rule about it."

"Go ahead, Mark," Donna prompted eagerly. The brightness in her eyes attained briefly the luster of a golden sparkle.

"Reverend Red," Mark said solemnly, "will you be good enough to officiate at our wedding, Donna's and mine?"

Deep red stained Red's expressive blond face.

"No, really! You don't mean it!" he ejaculated. "Are you saying that because you want me or just to please me? For it does please me."

"It pleases us, too," Donna assured him.

"But haven't you some family minister you'd rather have? Everybody has a pet family minister tucked away out of sight somewhere."

"Our minister is quite new," Mrs. Collwell gave corroboration to their request. "Donna and Mark hardly know him and Alan and I only very slightly. We are not too enthusiastic about him either."

"I hope that means by inference that you are by way of becoming enthusiastic about me," Red said. His smile was broad and inclusive. "I'm enthusiastic about you. All of you. Dad Collwell, too. I don't expect him to approve of me but he can't escape my enthusiasm. Did you hear that, Sammy? They are going to let me officiate at their union. And what God and I shall join together, let nobody take any liberties with. Bless you, my children."

He crossed to Donna, put his hand under her chin, uptilting her face, and kissed her on the lips. He shook hands with Mark.

He regarded Mrs. Collwell reflectively. "I am not sure of the proper procedure with mothers-in-law, since you are so determined to be correct about this. But what the dickens! I'm a liberal." He stooped and kissed her forehead.

For that brief interval there had been not one anxious or troubled thought among them.

He is a genius, Mark thought proudly. He is a great genius.

There was no diminution of their passionate attentiveness to the telephone, but otherwise conversation flowed along easily, entertainingly.

"I wish you had met Si Alison," Mark said suddenly. "Somehow every time I am with you, I find myself thinking of him. I get an insane notion that you and he are barking up opposite sides of the same tree."

"Si Alison?" Red encouraged him.

To a raptly attentive audience, Mark launched into a sympathetically humorous recital of the fantastic ranching project of Si Alison, Miriam and Jigger, and the little Jug.

"They tried to rope me into it, too," he concluded smilingly. "I've had a couple of letters from Si, and Jig's after me day and night. They want me to take charge of personnel."

"Are you considering it?" Red asked interestedly.

"No. Except when I am with you, I laugh at the whole idea. But somehow when you're around, I can't help wondering if maybe I'm not a fool to pass it up. I know if I were in charge of personnel, my first act would be to sign you up for parson. They've got to have a church, you know."

"Yes, they've got to have a church. They'll have a church."

"Would that be something like what you have in mind, Red?" Mrs. Collwell asked.

"Yes. It's exactly what I have in mind. The kind of church they'll have, I mean. They're going to start from scratch and keep it clean. They'll lay their foundation right. They'll change it when they have to, and keep it sound and up-to-date. They can get somebody just right for that. Maybe I can help them."

"But it isn't what you want?" Mrs. Collwell insisted.

"It's what I want them to have and every community to have. But I think there is a tougher job ahead for Sammy and me. We want to hole in some place where they didn't get off to a clean start, and the foundations are crumbling and the timbers are rotted and do a little dynamiting where it will do the most good. But thanks for the compliment, Mark."

"The compliment?"

"Yes. Linking me up with him. You're right. We are barking up the same tree. I'd like to meet him when he comes again."

It was nearly ten that evening when again the telephone rang and in the usual dead silence that followed Donna went into the den to answer. They did not hear her first agonized whisper, "Dad." But her three repetitions, increasingly crescendo, "Dad! Dad! Dad!" vibrated ringingly through the wide rooms. Mrs. Collwell and Mark were in the den before the echo stilled and it struck no

one as odd or unnatural that Sammy and Red were close behind.

"Dad, you old goat, where are you? . . . Yes. Yes, she's here. You can speak to her in a minute, as soon as I get through with you. You had a big business running out on me at a time like this. . . . I suppose you want me to be an old maid. . . . Of course, Dad. It's all your fault. I've chucked my job, I've moved back home, we've got the ring, we've got the preacher right here in the house. . . . Oh, no, no shotgun! It isn't that bad. . . . Now listen a minute, Dad. You can speak to her in a minute. How soon can you get here? I can't invite the guests until we set the date and we can't set that without you. . . . Certainly I am going to invite guests! I want to get back some of those wedding presents I've been giving away all these years. I'll probably get back the same ones. . . . But how soon, Dad? Mark wants to get the license tomorrow. . . . Listen, Dad, I've got to grab him while I can get him! Better-looking gals than I have an eye on him. . . . Oh, all right. You can speak to Mother. And then grab your hat and catch the next plane. . . . All right, all right."

Donna passed the receiver to her mother and put her hand over the mouthpiece. "Don't you give anything away!" she warned her hotly. "You weigh every word! If you start to wobble I'll grab the phone away from you."

"Oh, hello, Dad. Where in the world are you? The children have been trying everywhere to reach you. . . ." She turned slightly from the phone. "Lake. That's the name of that wheat man. I knew it had something to do with water. . . . Yes, I'm listening, Dad. I was speaking to the children. . . . Did you really, Dad? How nice! . . . Yes, there's plenty of room in the locker. . . . Well, all I know is they are here and all set to get married. . . . Yes, that's right. She resigned. Yes, she's back home. . . . Well, I do wish you'd hurry, Alan. It's getting on my nerves. Mark's here all the time, too, but Donna won't let anybody but you give her away though I'd be glad to. . . . Yes, that's right. The preacher is here,

too. No, it's nobody you know. They call him the Reverend Red. . . . Why, certainly not, Alan! . . . And we need you very badly so don't waste any more time. Good night, Alan."

She looked reproachfully at her daughter. "He certainly did go hunting! He got a big buck and twenty birds. He is having them frozen to ship home to the locker. He says he can make it in a couple of days anyhow."

"Did he say anything about—anything else?" Donna asked warily.

"No. He just asked if there had been any unpleasantness and I said certainly not. You wouldn't really call it unpleasantness, would you?"

"No," Donna said dully. "Certainly not. No unpleasantness." She turned blindly to Mark.

He lifted her into his arms and carried her to the divan where she crushed herself against him, her face out of sight against his shoulder.

"If you will show me where the ingredients are, Mrs. Collwell," Red said briskly, "and if Sammy will read off the recipe, I think I can tackle a bartending job. That part of my education has been neglected."

With a firm hand under her elbow, he led her into the kitchen, Sammy discreetly following. He closed the door behind their kind retreat.

Mrs. Collwell dabbed nervously at her eyes and smiled wanly. "Children are so foolish," she said weakly. "They were actually beginning to get me nervous, too."

Red observed the trembling of her knees beneath the silken gown. "Yes," he agreed. "Very foolish. You'd better sit down, little girl, before you fall down."

He eased her gently into a kitchen chair and stood over her, gazing down into her face.

"I can't understand what you were frightened about," he said slowly. "You were frightened, weren't you? But why?"

"I wasn't really frightened," she began, but corrected herself quickly. "Yes, I was a little frightened but I had nothing to be frightened about. I knew that. I kept reminding myself of it but still I felt frightened. Fear is a very contagious thing. I caught it from them."

"But personally you had nothing to fear," he prompted gently.

"Not a thing. He had promised to phone me three times. He had only phoned once. And Alan always keeps his promises."

Red smiled. "Three times. And you knew, on the third call, you could stop it."

"Yes, of course. I had only to remind him that I had stood by him and it was only fair that he should stand by me. Alan is very just."

Red smiled more broadly. "I see. Do you think he might have required stopping? Would he ever have gone through with it?"

"Of course not. Mark's right about Alan. He isn't the type. He respects his responsibility too much." She smiled faintly with tears in her eyes. "That first night, when he was so upset, he might have done it. I suppose he wanted to. But he remembered his responsibility and put it off. That week end he was playing a game with it, making all the pieces fit together. But in the quiet of all those long hours on the train and all the days and nights, he was bound to get his feet on the ground again. He had to. I've been expecting a letter every day telling me he was coming back to face the music. It was only the children that got me frightened."

"And the desired end already accomplished," he surmised shrewdly.

"Yes, of course. When she thought her parents had failed her, she turned to Mark. She had to turn to Mark. And after the first explosion of her obsession the embers just naturally burned themselves out. They had to. There was no more kindling."

Red patted her shoulder affectionately.

"Mothers have to be pretty smart, don't they?" he said admiringly. "Mothers and wives, too. Pret-ty-damn-smart."

"If they can," she assented meeting his eyes with trustful candor. "It isn't always easy."

In the living room, Donna cried her heart out against Mark's shoulder. But not for long. Determinedly she pulled herself together, raised her wet face and lifted the tear-drenched pansy eyes to his.

"Mark, will you forgive me?"

Mark kissed her. Some time elapsed before he offered a reply.

"No," he said at last. "Not until you have served your sentence. And the sentence is life, Donna."

Donna's wet lips smiled and faint glimmers, like pale early stars, showed for an instant in her misty eyes.

"May I have until early next week to put my childish affairs in order? . . . And I forgive you, Mark."

"You forgive me?"

"Yes. For not knocking me down in the snow that night and beating some sense into my silly brains. I forgive you this time. But please show more character in the future."

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